Australian Consumers' Association August 1996

CHOICE

Self-serve salad bars

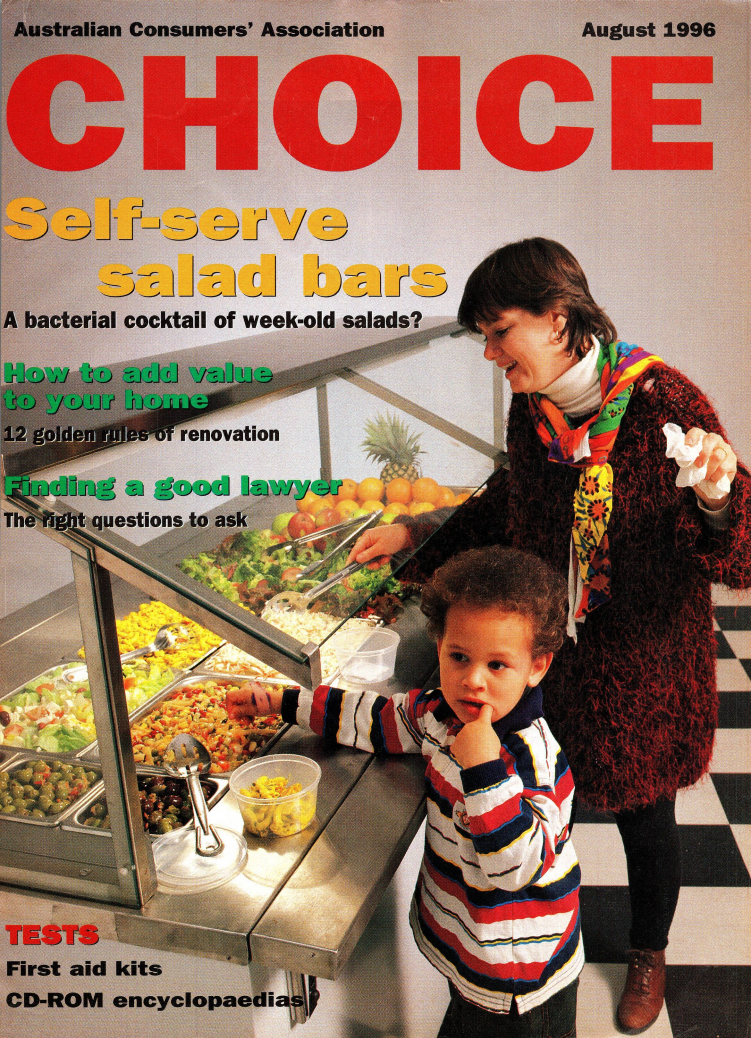
A bacterial cocktail of week-old salads?

How to add value to your home

12 golden rules of renovation

Finding a good lawyer

The right questions to ask



TESTS

First aid kits

CD-ROM encyclopaedias

About the Consumers' Association

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance the quality of life for consumers.

We are completely independent. All the products we test are bought randomly in the marketplace. We are not beholden to any commercial, government or union interests, and we don't accept advertising, paid or unpaid. Our income is derived from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and products.

We test and rate products and services. Our CHOICE ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a Best Buy. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. We can't conduct special tests or provide information about tested products beyond what appears in CHOICE.

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We represent and act in consumers' interests. We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote consumers' rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

Membership. Subscribers can become voting members of the Consumers' Association on application. Membership costs $75 per year, which covers your subscription to CHOICE plus a further subscription to our policy magazine, *Consuming Interest.*

About CHOICE

CHOICE is published monthly by the Australian Consumers' Association.

Subscription rates. $48 for one year, $89 for two years; institutions $66 per year.

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MONEYCHOICE$ gives accurate and independent credit information. It provides up-to-date details about the most competitive home loans, personal loans, overdrafts and credit cards from banking institutions in your area. The information can also be faxed. Call 1902 262 622. (Calls cost $1.50 per minute. Mobile/public phones have higher rates.)

Test Research provides fee-for-service testing of consumer products for other consumer organisations, government and industry. Contact Jeanette Dwyer on (02) 9577 3333.

Consuming Interest, our quarterly campaigning magazine, provides straight facts, probing analysis, in-depth reporting, informed opinion and stimulating debates. It also gives updates on the lobbying and campaign projects of the Consumers' Association.

CHOICE Travel. This magazine is produced by the UK Consumers' Association and reprinted by CHOICE four times a year. Its reports are independent in the same style as CHOICE and, while they're written from the perspective of a European base, most of the information in them is just as useful to travelling Australians.

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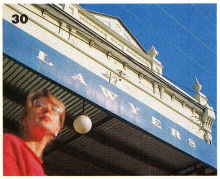

Coming in the next three issues

Tests: Vacuum cleaners, circular saws, dairy desserts, garden blower/vacs, cots, kettles, solar-powered lawnmower, petrol lawn trimmers, suitcases, mozzie zappers and coils, fake tan preparations.

Reports: Supermarket prices, and which chains have the most satisfied customers; where to invest $5000 to $10,000; how to buy a pool; toothpaste; setting up a trust fund; alternative medicine; wedding photos and videos; vitamin and mineral supplements; investing in retirement; travel insurance; sunscreens and sun care.

We try to bring you tests and reports in the planned month, but sometimes have to move an article because of problems that occur during testing and research, or for lack of space in a particular issue. We apologise if this causes any inconvenience.

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Many renovation projects will improve your family's lifestyle — but if you want to add value to your home, some could be an expensive mistake.

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'Revolutionary' surgical procedures such as keyhole and laser operations seem to offer some real benefits for patients, but you still need to go into them with your eyes open. We explain the potential problems and the questions you should ask.

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They look fresh and healthy, but they can be up to a week old and our tests showed a cocktail of bacteria — some of which are a potential health hazard.

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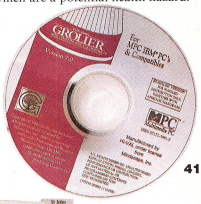
Eleven of the 28 first aid kits we tested would be unsuitable to deal with *any* of five common emergency situations.

41 CD-ROM encyclopaedias

More fun — especially for children — than leafing through a heavy tome, and a lot cheaper and tidier than those 20 volumes of paper. But differences in design make some CD-ROM encyclopaedias a much better buy than others.



Shopping

FALLING FOOD PRICES

BASIC FOOD ITEMS COST less in relation to wages in 1995 than in 1972, according to a survey commissioned by Coles supermarkets.

The survey looked at the cost of 15 grocery items and the working time it would take someone on the average Australian male weekly wage before tax ($655.07 in 1995 compared to $94.07 in 1972) to buy them.

For example, in 1995 it took a male on an average salary only 41 minutes to earn enough money to buy a kilo of rump steak (costing $11.67) compared to 61 minutes in 1972 (when the average Australian rump price was $2.53 a kilo).

Coles spokesperson Lynn Blackney says not only have wage rises outpaced food prices, but Australian retailers and manufacturers have become more competitive over the years.

Overall, the figures showed that in 1995 a man needed to work about 54 minutes less to buy the same basket of grocery items than he did in 1972.

Next month in CHOICE we report on our survey of 149 supermarkets from major chains across Australia — which are the cheapest and which do you like best?

The sign seems to be proved right: basic food items cost less in relation to wages than in 1972.

Consumer action

WANT TO WORK FOR CHOICE?

We're looking for an exceptional dietitian, one who has a broad knowledge of food and nutrition, a strong background in science and who wants to develop their skills in writing for our publications and consumer advocacy in the food area.

High-quality research, strong project management skills and the ability to present often complex information in a clear and simple manner (but without making issues simplistic) will be critical in your role of managing, researching and, in some cases, writing articles for CHOICE. The policy component of this position needs a strategic thinker, with a strong sense of direction and a desire to achieve real outcomes for consumers.

He or she should have qualifications acceptable to the Dietitian's Association of Australia, and have several years of experience in working with food, people and nutrition. The person we want to employ will enjoy working as part of a team, have a high level of presentation and communication skills, and will be willing, over time, to deal with the media on ACA's behalf.

Please apply in writing, including a résumé. For more information contact Alan Sharp on (02) 9577 3333.

Send applications, marked **Dietitian**, to CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, by August 15, 1996.

Can you help?

DRIVING LESSONS

If you or someone in your family has recently taken driving lessons, we'd like to hear about your experiences, both good and bad. We'd like to know how you went about choosing a driving school, how much lessons cost and how much tuition you needed before you passed your driving test. Were you completely satisfied with the school and its instructors?

Please write to **Driving lessons**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or fax to (02) 9577 3377, by August 31, 1996.

Thank you for your help.

The World Book of [your surname]

UNIQUE IT AIN'T

I HAVE EXCITING NEWS for you and fellow [your surname]s." Sound familiar? Then you've probably received an invitation from Family Heritage Australia to order *The World Book of [your surname]s*, "the only compilation of [your surname] families available in the world today".

Three subscribers — all with a different name — sent us copies of the promotional material they had received from Family Heritage Australia and asked what it was all about.

Several years ago we reported on three occasions about companies promoting similar books, each with slightly different names at various times. The current version of *The World Book of [your surname]s* is much the same as those of the past. It contains general information about genealogy and emigration, which is the same for all the different surnames.

The only information that specifically relates to each particular name is a list of addresses of people with that surname in a number of countries. Depending on the name, it may also contain information on where and how it originated and the surname's coat of arms.

If you're interested in an address list of people who share your surname, you might think the book is worth the $43.90 it costs. But don't expect your family history — it won't tell you whether or how the people listed in it are related.

To find that out and trace your family tree, the genealogists' (or genealogical) society in your state is a good starting point. They have thousands of books and records on file in their libraries and can assist with research advice.

Bank accounts

VIRIDIAN: JUST WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

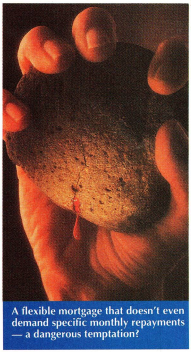
WHAT DOES A SEMI-naked man squeezing blood from a stone have to do with mortgage repayments?

If you've seen the advertising for the NSW State Bank's new **Viridian** account you may well have asked this question. Despite a big advertising push, the bank doesn't seem to be sending a very clear message about its new financial product, **Viridian.**

What's the fuss all about? **Viridian** is an everyday banking ('transaction') account packaged with your home loan. It's another version of a flexible mortgage, which allows you to put all your spare cash into your home loan but be able to get it back if you need it. The advantage is that your savings will be paying off your loan more quickly. Even if you take the money out again, at least you've effectively earned tax-free interest at the home loan rate.

The main difference between **Viridian** and other flexible mortgages is that **Viridian** doesn't require specific monthly repayments. This extra flexibility will require a lot of discipline if borrowers are going to reduce the amount they owe over time.

But State Bank customers in NSW, the bank's home state, will have to show more discipline than those in Victoria and Queensland.



A flexible mortgage that doesn't even demand specific monthly repayments — a dangerous temptation!

While NSW account holders will be charged an interest rate of 9.9%, those in Victoria or Queensland will get a rate of 9.5%.

Why? Customers in NSW seem to be subsidising the State Bank's attempt to grab a share of the market in other states. If you're a NSW customer, ask your branch manager for the lower Victorian and Queensland rate — if it's not forthcoming, try squeezing the rocks of a different bank.

Frozen meals

WHAT YOU SEE ISN'T ALWAYS WHAT YOU GET

"YOU MAY NEED A MAGNIfying glass to search for the very few shrimps," says disappointed subscriber R Howard from Doncaster, Victoria, who wrote to us to complain about the big difference between the photo (a 'serving suggestion') on the packaging of **GRIFF'S Satay Prawns** and what was actually inside.

You can see from the photo how the two compare. We didn't quite need a magnifying glass for our search, but the 26 small to tiny shrimps we found will be disappointing if you're expecting those eight succulent king prawns in the serving suggestion photo.

GRIFF'S Satay Prawns may not be the only frozen meal where what you find on your plate doesn't live up to the photo on the packaging. But in this case the difference is remarkable — no amount of clever cooking and serving can turn shrimps into king prawns.

"It still tastes nice — no complaints there — but the photo is so dishonest. The manufacturers should be more accountable," says Mr Howard. In fact, according to our national food laws, manufacturers can only use such photos on the pack if they are not misleading or deceptive.

We asked McCain — which owns the **GRIFF'S** brand — what it thought of the difference between the photo and reality. Ian Wilmot from McCain said, "From a marketing point of view it is, of course, not in our interest to mislead consumers. We want them to say, 'That's a good product, I'm going to buy it again'." McCain has agreed to review the packaging.

No amount of clever cooking can turn the tiny shrimps inside the packet into the succulent king prawns on the outside.

Nutrition

GUARDIAN UPDATE

IN OUR JANUARY EDITION, WE CRITIcised cereal giant Kellogg's for the way it marketed one of its new products, **Guardian.**

We weren't concerned with the cereal itself, but the imagery and logos used on the box, which we thought suggested **Guardian** would protect your heart from illness.

It wasn't the first time Kellogg's has faced criticism over the marketing on its packaging — the company had been fined for its **All Bran** packaging and subsequently said it would review the packaging on all its products.

As a result of its review, Kellogg's has changed the packaging of **Guardian** — gone are the cardiographs and hearts. In place of the "every heart needs a guardian" logo is "everybody needs a guardian", and the original "no cholesterol, low in fat" is now "high in fibre, low in fat". Although the heart-shaped strawberries remain, the new package is an improvement.

The new Guardian packaging (right) is an improvement — the old pack (left) sails much closer to the wind when it comes to health claims.

Toss the salad

We spot-checked 61 self-serve salad bars and found more than half the salads were unacceptable. One in five was a potential health hazard.

SELF-SERVE SALAD BARS ARE becoming increasingly popular. They cater for the nineties consumer who wants something fast and fresh. But just how fresh are they? And can they be a health hazard?

We spot-checked 61 supermarket and restaurant salad bars to find out.

HOW FRESH IS FRESH?

They may look fresh and delicious, but our research revealed it's quite common for 'fresh' salads (particularly in supermarkets) to have been made a week ago — or even longer. And our microbiological results confirm the salads are far from fresh.

Clever food technology has enabled preparation of salads that can last a long time before going off. They're made more acidic with dressing or mayonnaise and stored at low temperatures, for example. But in the real world things don't always go according to plan, and poor storage and sloppy handling in shops and restaurants often mean they don't last as long as expected. Even if a salad hadn't significantly deteriorated after eight days, would you still call it fresh? And how nutritious will it be after that length of time? It's sure to have lost some of its vitamin content.

A 'TIME-BOMB' WAITING TO GO OFF?

There are many opportunities for bacteria to contaminate and grow in this type of salad.

The biggest danger is the open-slather approach that lets people poke and prod the salad in a salad bar. Little 'taste tests' are not uncommon. Coughs and sneezes, although combatted to an extent by sneeze barriers, are still a source of contamination. And of course there's the child factor — no barriers can completely protect the salads from curious children.

However, the potential danger doesn't start or stop with the customer. Salad ingredients may be contaminated to begin with or bacteria may be introduced during processing, even before they reach the shop or restaurant. The potentially long display time, often at too high a temperature, gives bacteria a chance to grow. And because salads are usually eaten as they come, any bacteria present won't be killed by cooking.

In the case of take-away salads there is the added risk of bacteria multiplying during transport home and before you eat them.

RISK OF FOOD POISONING

More than half the 61 samples we tested were unacceptable, with one in five a potential health hazard, according to our criteria. Our results and the standards we measured the salads against are given in the chart and notes on the right.

The main health problem we found was *Listeria monocytogenes*, which showed up in 11 of the 61 samples. It's likely to come from contaminated raw ingredients and is of particular concern in salads destined for the salad bar because of their extended shelf life. Listeria can grow at refrigeration temperatures and many salads are displayed at higher temperatures than that, where the bacteria multiply even faster.

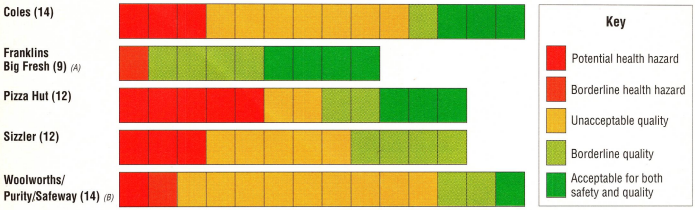
For pregnant women, very young children, elderly people or people with weak immune systems ('at-risk' groups) *Listeria monocytogenes* can have serious effects such as miscarriage and meningitis. If you're at risk it's wise to avoid the types of food that are most commonly contaminated with listeria. See *Listeria — questions and answers* on page 9 for more information.

(to page 8)

Results

Self-serve salad bars

Each square in the graphic represents one outlet of a chain.



(A) Deli salad bar assessed — see profiles, page 10.

(B) Safeway and Purity are part of the Woolworths group.

Salads were purchased from 61 salad bars. Some salads didn't meet our criteria for either safety or quality. The colour shown for those salads is that of their safety result.

Potential health hazard

Certain bacteria have the potential to cause food poisoning or other disease. We tested for some of these bacteria. Any sample which contained one or more of the following was considered a potential health hazard and therefore unacceptable:

- *Listeria monocytogenes* present in 25 grams of salad sample.
- The type of *Staphylococcus* which causes food poisoning present at levels greater than 1000 organisms per gram of salad.
- *Bacillus cereus* present at levels greater than 1000 organisms per gram of salad.

Twelve samples were judged a potential health hazard — 11 contained *Listeria monocytogenes* and one contained *Staphylococcus*.

Borderline health hazard

Safety of a sample was considered borderline if either of the following was found:

- *Staphylococcus* levels of between 100 to 1000 organisms per gram of salad.
- *Bacillus cereus* levels of between 100 and 1000 organisms per gram of salad.

Two samples, both containing *Bacillus cereus*, fitted into this category.

Unacceptable quality

Some bacteria in themselves may not be a health hazard, but large numbers of them indicate that a product is of poor quality — it's been handled unhygienically, or is at the end of its shelf life. Any sample that contained one or both of the following was considered to be of unacceptable quality:

- A high general bacteria level, called a standard plate count (SPC), of greater than 10 million organisms per gram of salad.
- *E. coli* present at levels of greater than 100 organisms per gram of salad.

Twenty-nine samples were of unacceptable quality — 25 with a high SPC (five of these being samples that were also a potential health hazard and one which was also of borderline safety) and four with high levels of *E. coli*.

Borderline quality

Samples with either or both of the following were judged borderline:

- A standard plate count (SPC) between one million and 10 million organisms per gram of salad.
- *E. coli* levels of between 10 and 100 organisms per gram of salad.

Nineteen samples were of borderline quality (five of these being samples that were also a potential health hazard and one of borderline safety).

Acceptable — safety and quality

A sample was considered acceptable from both a safety and quality viewpoint if it met all of the following criteria:

- No *Listeria monocytogenes* present in 25 grams of salad.
- The type of *Staphylococcus* that can cause food poisoning at levels of less than 100 organisms per gram of salad.
- *Bacillus cereus* levels of less than 100 organisms per gram of salad.
- A standard plate count (SPC) of less than one million organisms per gram of salad.
- *E. coli* levels of less than 10 organisms per gram of salad.

Only eleven samples were acceptable.

The test

We sent our food scientist around Australia to investigate salad bars. We confined ourselves to self-serve salad bars in major supermarket and restaurant chains — **COLES**, **WOOLWORTHS**, **SAFEWAY**, **PURITY**, **FRANKLINS BIG FRESH**, **PIZZA HUT** and **SIZZLER**.

The study started in Hobart, then took our food scientist to Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and Sydney.

We assessed a total of 61 self-serve salad bars, taking samples to be checked for food-poisoning and other bacteria. Our investigator also inspected all of the salad bars, looking at such things as hygiene, design, layout, customer instructions, salad types and temperatures. For a comparison of the chains see *Good practices — how do the chains compare?* on page 10.

Samples of three (or sometimes four) salads were taken from each outlet to represent a good mix of what's on offer — this usually consisted of tabouli or Greek salad, rice salad, and potato or pasta salad or coleslaw. Meat and seafood-based salads were always chosen when they were available. The temperatures of the salads were also recorded within five minutes of sample collection.

Sneeze guards can protect a salad bar from adults' coughs and colds, but no barriers can effectively discourage inquisitive kids.

We also found high levels of the food-poisoning form of staphylococcus in one sample — potentially enough to make you sick. Its presence usually points to contamination from humans — for example, from coughs, sneezes or boils.

Two of the samples contained *Bacillus cereus* — this is a food-poisoning bacteria which is particularly associated with starchy foods such as rice and pasta. The problem usually occurs when the food is prepared in bulk and then stored for a while. The amount we found probably wouldn't make you sick, but it's still a concern because it can continue to grow to numbers that could cause food poisoning, if given the chance (for example, in salads displayed for a long time at less than ideal temperatures).

WHAT ELSE WAS WRONG WITH THEM?

High levels of *E. coli* showed up in four samples. These bacteria live in the gut of animals and humans, and their presence in food indicates faecal contamination. This can be caused by poor hygiene practices, such as ineffective washing of raw salad vegetables (which have been in contact with soil) or food handlers not washing their hands after visiting the toilet. Such poor practices mean it's just good luck that serious food-poisoning organisms like salmonella and shigella aren't present — they're found in the gut of animals and humans along with *E. coli*.

The rest of the samples we rated unacceptable had a high general bacteria count (called a standard plate count or SPC), often in conjunction with a high level of yeasts, both of which are an indicator of a lack of freshness. A high SPC means the product has either reached the end of its life and is close to going off, or that the ingredients have been handled or stored poorly. In both cases the end result is the same — a poor-quality salad.

How to spot a good salad bar

Unfortunately, there's no guarantee that a salad bar that looks good will have clean, safe food. However, there are some things you can look out for to help you decide whether you want to buy:

- A clean salad bar, without spilled or over-loaded salads.
- Fresh-looking salads — don't buy from salad bars with wilted, tired-looking or dried-out salads.
- Long-handled utensils, preferably with hooked handles to prevent them falling into the salads.
- An effective sneeze barrier above the salads.
- Easy access — you shouldn't have to stretch very far to reach any salad, so your sleeve or bracelet can't dangle in them.
- Well located — a salad bar is best away from an entrance or exit so it can't get contaminated from outside, but somewhere where it can be closely supervised (this is usually near the deli in retail outlets — however, this doesn't guarantee effective supervision).
- Good customer instructions on how to use the salad bar in a hygienic manner.
- Cold salads — don't poke your finger in the salad to find this out! Feel the air temperature around the salads and check the temperature gauge (if there is one). Salad temperatures should be below 5°C.
- Salad bars which don't contain any meat, poultry, fish or egg-based salads — bacteria love to grow in high-protein foods, especially if they aren't stored at low enough temperatures.
- Napkins and a rubbish bin provided for customers (in retail outlets).
- A clean container and lid dispenser, with no loose items sitting around the salad bar (in retail outlets).

Spoons that look as if they've been shared between several salads mean any bacteria present could have been shared around too.

TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY?

Convenience is one thing, but if you're looking for safe, fresh salad, the odds don't look good — only 11 out of 61 salads passed all our microbiological tests. However, in response to our results the companies involved say they'll take some positive action (see *What's being done*, right). But because of a self-serve salad bar's very nature, there may always be a problem with lack of freshness or safety. Overall, our results are a good indication of the big picture, and make it impossible for us to recommend self-serve salad.

Listeria — questions and answers

HOW DOES IT END UP IN OUR FOOD?

Listeria can be found pretty much everywhere — in soil, sewage, rivers, vegetables, insects, humans and animals, food-manufacturing premises and kitchens. Unlike most other food-poisoning bacteria, it can grow at refrigerator temperatures (below 5°C). All this makes listeria a real nuisance. There are stringent manufacturing processes that can control it, but our results show that currently it's not being very well controlled in the salad industry.

The best advice for people at risk — such as pregnant women — is to avoid foods which are commonly contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

WHO'S AT RISK?

- Pregnant women and their unborn children.
- Very young children.
- Elderly people.
- People whose immune systems are weak — for example, people with cancer, transplant recipients, people with alchohol dependency and people who are HIV-positive or have AIDS.

WHAT'S THE EFFECT?

Listeria monocytogenes infection can cause anything from fever, headaches, nausea and vomiting to meningitis and miscarriage.

WHAT FOOD SHOULD YOU AVOID IF YOU'RE IN AN AT-RISK GROUP?

- Chilled precooked fish, seafood and meats (such as cold cuts, cold chicken, sliced meats) as well as salami and pâté.
- Uncooked seafood, smoked mussels and smoked salmon.
- Soft cheeses (such as camembert and brie), unpasteurised milk, soft-serve ice cream.
- Salads that have been prepared more than 12 hours in advance.

Why is it going wrong?

KNOW THE CODE — BUT WHICH ONE?

It's perhaps understandable if people in the salad bar business are confused. There are so many codes of practice out there it's difficult to know where to go if they want to do the right thing.

There is a national voluntary code for self-serve takeaway salad bars (from the National Food Authority) and the states also have codes which deal with this type of food. So many codes wouldn't be so bad if they required the same things, but they don't!

- We need one national code of practice that enforcement agencies and industry alike can look to for guidance in the quest to make self-serve food safe to eat. As our governments move to make our food regulations less strict and include more voluntary codes of practice, our results show salad bars to be yet another instance where basic safety requirements should be mandatory.

THE PROBLEMS — AND THE ANSWERS!

We found a number of problems with self-serve salad bars, some of which can be solved easily, some which need government action.

- **Lack of effective supervision — supervision of salad bars is generally erratic and inconsistent.** Salad bars should be supervised by the retailer at all times and this should be regularly checked by government inspectors.
- **Poor temperature control** — temperature of salad bar units needs to be more closely controlled and checked, as it's a key factor in ensuring a safe, high-quality product.
- **The sale of protein-based salads, such as meat, chicken, seafood and eggs.** Bacteria love these high-protein foods, which makes them a potential health hazard in a salad bar. The national code of practice recommends that these types of salad shouldn't be sold from self-serve takeaway salad bars. However, different states and retail outlets have different policies — some allow these salads, some don't. There should be a national policy not to sell these potentially hazardous foods in self-serve salad bars.

WHAT'S BEING DONE?

- CHOICE is involved in a review of the national code of practice on self-serve salad bars. This review is considering a number of issues, including all the problems listed above.
- While all major operators have training programs in place which deal with food safety, handling and cleaning, our tests have resulted in further positive action from the industry. All the chains we tested have stated that they are improving and updating their procedures. However, commitment to effective supervision is the key to making sure this effort isn't wasted.
- Salad temperatures in the restaurant chains were of particular concern:
  — In response to our tests, Sizzler says it intends to improve its salad temperatures by ensuring the salads are as cold as possible when they're put in the salad bar. It's also reviewing the design of its salad bar containers and refrigeration units.
  — Pizza Hut says it's introducing new salad bar units into its restaurants, designed to ensure that salad temperatures are kept below 5°C.

Good practices — how do the chains compare?

Although self-serve salad bars have inherent hygiene problems, a number of factors contribute to delivery of a safer, more wholesome product. Good practices at display level (hygiene, design, layout, customer instructions, salad types and temperatures) play a major part in the whole process. The following profiles list the good and bad aspects of the salad bars we assessed.

COLES

Description: A self-serve supermarket salad bar with a large range of mixed salads.

- 14 outlets assessed.

Good points

- Good design with easy access, effective sneeze barriers, container and lid dispensers and visible temperature gauge (two outlets did not have temperature gauges).
- Adequate or good customer instructions.
- Most had napkins and rubbish bins for customer use.
- Effective temperature control (except in one outlet).

Bad points

- Some poorly located salad bars — two where they couldn't be easily supervised and two near an entrance.
- Five of the outlets included potentially hazardous protein-based salads.
- Six of the outlets had poorly designed spoons that can fall into salads.

FRANKLINS BIG FRESH

Description: A self-serve supermarket salad bar with a good variety of mixed salads, including a 'lite' range (with 3% fat).

- Nine outlets assessed. *(A)*

Good points

- Well located.
- Effective sneeze barrier and visible temperature gauge.
- Effective temperature control in most outlets.
- Adequate customer instructions (except in two outlets).

Bad points

- You have to reach across salads to get at those at the rear (in seven out of nine outlets).
- Poorly designed spoons can fall into salads.
- Potentially hazardous protein-based salads in four outlets.
- Six outlets had no rubbish bins and four had no napkins for customer use.

(A) Big Fresh has two salad bars, both of which are self-serve — one in the fresh produce department (where they make the salads in the store), and a larger one in the deli section (where salads are made off-site by suppliers) — we tested the latter.

PIZZA HUT

Description: Small self-serve restaurant salad bar with a very limited range of single-item salads and two or three mixed salads.

- 12 restaurants assessed.

Good points

- Effective sneeze barrier and easy access.
- No potentially hazardous protein-based salads.

Bad points

- Poor temperature control.
- No customer instructions.
- No visible temperature gauge.
- Poor utensil design — short tongs that can fall into salads.
- Poor tending of salad bar.

Can you find a healthy salad out there?

Having salad with a meal may feel virtuous, but 'salad' can be anything from a leaf of lettuce to a coleslaw heavily laden with mayonnaise or drenched in some other high-fat dressing.

- If you're looking for salad choices which are low in calories, choose the basic salad vegies — plenty of greens (lettuce, cucumber, celery, snow peas, alfalfa sprouts) and tomatoes — with a low-fat or no dressing.

This is easier said than done if you're buying from a supermarket. Almost all supermarket salads have some dressing added (there's a very good reason for this — the acid in a dressing acts as a preservative, helping to stop bacterial growth) and often the only thing with lettuce in it seems to be Greek salad — with dressing and fetta cheese (making it relatively high in fat).

At **SIZZLER** you can tailor-make a salad to suit yourself. There's a large range of single items and the various dressings can be added separately. You can do this at **PIZZA HUT** as well, but they have a much smaller range.

- When choosing potato, pasta, coleslaw or rice salad, look for reduced-fat dressings if possible. Often this isn't an option in self-serve salad bars — either there aren't any salads with reduced-fat dressing or they don't advertise the fact. However, if you're lucky you may find low-fat mixed salads — we sometimes saw 'lite' salads clearly labelled, notably at **FRANKLINS BIG FRESH**.

Sizzler
Steak · Seafood · Salad

'The Fresh Food People'
WOOLWORTHS

SIZZLER

Description: A large self-serve restaurant salad bar with a large range of single-item salads and a smaller range of mixed salads.

■ 12 restaurants assessed.

Good points

■ Well supervised — fairly constant cleaning and replenishing of salads.

■ Effective sneeze barrier and easy access.

Bad points

■ Poor temperature control — overall, Sizzler had the highest salad temperatures.

■ No customer instructions.

■ No visible temperature gauge.

■ Poor utensil design — short tongs that can fall into salads.

■ Potentially hazardous protein-based salads.

WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY/PURITY*

Description: A self-serve supermarket salad bar with a large range to choose from.

■ 14 outlets assessed.

Good points

■ Well located.

■ Good design with easy access, effective sneeze barriers, container and lid dispensers and visible temperature gauges (except for the **SAFEWAY** outlets, which had no gauges).

■ Effective temperature control (except in two outlets).

■ Adequate customer instructions (except for one outlet).

■ No potentially hazardous protein-based salads (except for one **PURITY** outlet)

Bad points

■ No paper napkins in six outlets (three **PURITY**, three **WOOLWORTHS**) and no rubbish bins in four outlets (two **PURITY**, two **WOOLWORTHS**).

■ Poorly designed spoons which can fall into salads (except for the three **SAFEWAY** and two of the **WOOLWORTHS** outlets).

* Safeway and Purity are part of the Woolworths group.

The journey home and beyond

■ When shopping, buy salads and other chilled foods last (particularly meat, fish and milk products which are high-protein foods and spoil easily).

■ Go straight home with your shopping. It's a good idea to keep an insulated container in your car.

■ Store salad in the fridge (below 5°C).

■ Ideally, you should eat salads within 12 hours of buying them.

Preparing safe salads at home

If you're looking for a truly fresh salad your best bet is to make it at home with ingredients you've selected yourself.

■ The first rule of safe food preparation in the home is to keep everything clean — yourself included. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before starting any task in the kitchen.

■ Wash all salad vegetables thoroughly, paying particular attention to hidden soil and grit.

■ If your salad isn't eaten immediately after you've made it, keep it sealed in the fridge (below 5°C), away from raw foods such as meat, and eat it within 12 hours.

A renovation of this quality will cost money, and unless your house is in an upmarket suburb, you'd be unlikely to recoup your expenses.

Improving your home — and its value?

If you're thinking of renovating your home, you probably want to improve your family's lifestyle. But if you want to add value, some projects could be a costly mistake.

RENOVATING YOUR HOME means living with mess and inconvenience, often for some considerable time. If you intend to continue living in it afterwards, it's easier to put up with — you know when it's all done, the renovation will make your life easier. So if it's lifestyle improvement you're after, you only have to consider your needs and your hip pocket when you're planning a renovation. However, making money is a different story.

There *are* people who renovate houses for profit — most people have heard a story of someone who made a bundle by doing up an old house. But people who make it into their business buy particular houses in particular areas and do particular renovations.

For this article we've focused on renovating the house you already live in — in terms of selling it, is it worth putting in a pool, will an extra room make for a fast sale, could a new kitchen be just what a buyer is looking for? And most important of all, will you be able to make more than the renovation cost you?

We asked registered valuers and real estate agents across the country what people are looking for when they buy a house — what adds value, what doesn't.

Some were quite reluctant to give specific advice, as it's very difficult to generalise — even if you take the same extension, renovation or home improvement, whether and by how much it'll increase the value of a house depends on many variables. The quality of the work done, the area, the type and fabric of the house, its age and orientation, demographic trends and, most importantly, the state of the housing market will all affect the price you can sell your house for.

However, keeping this in mind, we've put together 12 golden rules of renovation — a picture of what works where and why. The good news is that there are inexpensive ways to add to the value of your home. The bad news is that the new pool or bigger living area you've been hoping for won't necessarily recoup its costs when you sell later— in fact, you could even find yourself going backwards.

12 golden rules of renovation

1 TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE BACK

Many renovations won't add the full value of your outlay.

When you install a new bathroom or kitchen, for example, you start by taking out the existing one. No matter how old or below modern standards it is, if you rip out, relocate or destroy something that's functional and in working order, you're decreasing the value of your existing house. It's important to keep that in mind when you're assessing the potential overall financial gain of a renovation.

"In our experience, generally we find when people replace old with new (say a kitchen or bathroom), the full cost of the renovation is unlikely to be added to the value of the property. But when they create something new (say a pergola or living area), they're more likely to increase the property's value relative to the cost of the improvement," says property valuer Matt Ganter of HTW Valuers in Rockhampton.

This doesn't mean, however, that you'll automatically make money with every addition or extension. The type of house you're renovating and the market you're appealing to will influence its value (see rules 2 and 5).

2 MAJOR PROJECTS

Most structural work or major renovations are unlikely to raise the value of your house beyond costs.

When it comes to big jobs like adding another storey, restumping the house or replacing the roof, plumbing or wiring, you may have difficulties doing more than recouping your costs when you sell the house later, according to the experts we spoke to. But as with other general rules, there are always exceptions — if by adding a second storey you gain a million-dollar water view, for example.

Overall, though, it's the low-cost, cosmetic improvements that have a far greater potential to increase the value of a house than large, costly building projects (see rule 6 on page 8).

3 BEWARE OF OVERCAPITALISING

As a rule of thumb, don't spend more than 25% of the value of your house on renovations, or you'll risk overcapitalising — paying more in than you can possibly recover when you sell.

Another general rule is not to raise the value of your house to more than 25% above the average value of similar houses in the area. People who want to buy a $400,000 house won't usually be looking in an area where houses sell for $300,000.

4 BROAD APPEAL — FORGET POOLS, SPAS OR SAUNAS

Don't narrow the appeal of your house — a house that appeals to a broad market is more likely to sell well.

Adding a swimming pool, sauna or spa costs a lot of money and — according to *all* the experts we contacted — doesn't add to the value of a house.

Our survey

We surveyed 15 property professionals across Australia — including the presidents of the state and territory branches of the Institute of Valuers and Land Economists and the Real Estate Institute of Australia — for their opinions on what type of home improvement adds value to a house and what's best avoided if you don't want to lose money when you sell. Twelve returned the survey, one provided general information and two declined to respond.

Our survey included the following broad areas:

- Extensions.
- Renovations.
- Cosmetic improvements.
- Structural changes.
- 'Green' improvements.
- Other alterations.

Under each of these categories we listed various specific projects — 30 altogether, including things such as adding a room, putting in a new kitchen, polishing floorboards and so on. As a particular project may pay off for one type of house but not for another, we also listed three types of house — one likely to be occupied by a young professional couple, one by a young family and one by an established family.

For each of these projects and each type of house, survey participants were asked to indicate whether it would add value to the house beyond cost, recoup costs so you'd break even, or wouldn't recoup costs.

The results of our survey indicate that adding value to a house is a very individual thing indeed. The value of most renovations is dependent on many factors, and the experts in different parts of the country simply did not agree.

Survey participants had 90 options (30 projects for three types of house). But only for *one* project for *one* type of house did we get unanimity — all the survey participants indicated that you wouldn't recoup the costs for adding a pool to a house likely to be occupied by an established family. None indicated that a pool would *add* value to the other types of house either; in fact most indicated you would lose money.

Another example: putting in a new kitchen or bathroom are common house renovations. It had repeatedly been pointed out to us how important the state of these rooms is when you sell your house. But when we wanted to find out how these renovations affect the *value* of a house, the responses varied.

Overall, the majority indicated that putting in a new kitchen or bathroom would either add value beyond cost or you'd break even. For the house likely to be occupied by a young professional couple, all respondents agreed you would add value or at least cover your costs. However, for the house likely to be occupied by a young family, six indicated you *wouldn't* recoup costs for putting in a new kitchen or bathroom, while six others indicated such a renovation would either add value or you'd break even.

For other projects, the responses we received were even more varied. Where we could draw overall conclusions from a majority of responses, therefore, we've kept them general and incorporated them into the *12 golden rules of renovation*.

Indeed, most said such projects would be unlikely to recover costs when the house is sold. While such additions can greatly improve your lifestyle while you live in the house, they can narrow the market of prospective buyers.

"People's leisure time these days is often limited and the time spent cleaning and maintaining [a pool or spa] may be a burden to many people," says property valuer Alison Rook of Hodder, Rook and Associates in Sydney.

5 SUIT THE MARKET — WHEN NOT TO ADD A ROOM

Think about the people who'll be interested in buying your property.

The population profile is changing — at least in some areas. More single-person households and single-parent families need less space and more compact housing. So add a room if you want to stay in the house and make use of it, but be aware you're unlikely to recoup your costs. If you want to sell, customise your house to the local market instead.

Neutral colours are more popular — grape and tangerine may be your personal favourites, but they won't appeal to everyone.

For example, if you live in a three-bedroom inner-city terrace house, converting one bedroom to give more generous living and entertainment space could increase its value, as this type of house is more likely to be sought after by professional couples.

Rearranging the floor plan in this type of house could also increase its value — for example, bringing the kitchen and bathroom to the middle of the house and creating more open living space .

It's unlikely, however, that you'll be able to recoup your costs for such a renovation if you live in a newer estate and your house is likely to be occupied by a young family buying their first home. According to the national chair of the First National Group, real estate agent Pauline Rooney of Berri, SA, this type of house is very price-sensitive. "Improvements may assist a faster sale but don't always enhance the price," she says.

6 THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT

Cosmetic improvements can be inexpensive and can do more to increase the value of your house than big projects.

Freshly painted interior walls (and exterior, if appropriate) generally enhance a house's value. The same applies to floor coverings. If yours need upgrading before the sale, ask a local property professional what buyers

AGAINST THE TREND ... AND HAPPY

In past decades, Australians typically moved house every seven years, but not so the Manchesters of Turramurra, Sydney. For the past 15 years they've lived at the same address. When they bought their three-bedroom, single-storey house in 1981, it suited their purposes well. Fifteen years later, however, the family (two adults and three children at high school) had outgrown its space.

But they all wanted to stay in the area — they liked the neighbours and its close proximity to public transport and schools. So they checked the newspapers for a more spacious house in the same area. There was no shortage of bigger houses, but the cost was prohibitive. Their own home was worth around $350,000 at the time — a bigger one in the same area would have cost them about $450,000 to $500,000.

Rather than spend an additional $100,000 to $150,000 for a new house, the Manchesters decided to extend. They knew exactly what they wanted (a second storey with two extra bedrooms, more living space and an additional toilet) and shopped around to get it all for $70,000 to lock-up stage.

The Manchesters intend to live in their home for years to come; they don't care about its future resale value. They're sure their decision to invest in a major renovation was the right one for them — they're very satisfied with their 'new' old home and are enjoying living with the additional space.

prefer in your area. People are more aware of allergies nowadays, so your type of house might sell better with freshly polished floorboards than with new wall-to-wall carpet.

Present your house clean and in good working order. This is particularly important in bathrooms and kitchens. Make sure your windows, curtains, blinds, oven, grill, hotplates, tiles and grouting are sparkling clean. It takes little or no money to fix dripping taps, loose door handles and tight windows and doors, but the small effort minor repairs and clean-up jobs take can make or break a sale.

The right lighting, and a feeling of space, can create the right ambience for a sale.When prospective buyers inspect your house on a cloudy day or in the evening, use light effectively. Switch on lamps, even if they're not part of the deal, to brighten up dark areas.

A change to more transparent or lighter curtains may be all you need to give darker rooms a friendlier appearance. They don't have to be expensive; keep them neutral and functional.

Paring down the things on display throughout your home, especially on kitchen benches, will also make the space appear larger.

7 KEEP IT NEUTRAL

The colours you choose throughout your home should have a broad appeal — neutral colours sell.

If you repaint your house before the sale, avoid strong colours; they may not be to other people's taste. Even if a vibrant colour perfectly matches your kitchen or bathroom accessories, for example, remember you'll take them — and the look of the room — with you when you move out.

Neutral colours, on the other hand, will give the new owners more scope to add their personal touches and complement the basics with accessories in their preferred colour schemes.

A final word about colours: if you want a small room to appear larger, use light and cool colours; warm colours tend to make a space look smaller, but warm and cosy.

8 KITCHEN AND BATHROOM

Kitchen and bathroom are of particular importance to home makers — traditionally women — who make many of the decisions related to buying a house.

Although gender roles are changing, according to the property professionals we spoke to, women are particularly influential when it comes to buying a house, and they're looking for an aesthetically pleasing, functional kitchen and bathroom which are easy to clean.

If your kitchen or bathroom needs an update, keep it in line with the style and price of your house. A small, modest house in an area at the lower end of the market probably won't benefit from expensive and luxurious kitchen and bathroom fittings. Likewise, in an upmarket house in a wealthy area, a cheap kitchen may deter buyers.

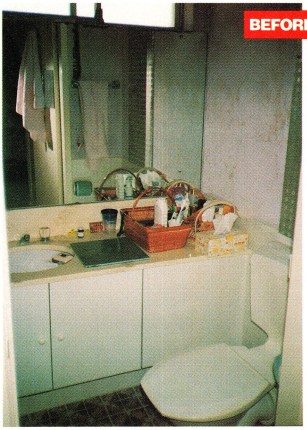
If your kitchen is looking outdated and you can't afford to install a modern one, use your decorating skills to improve its appearance. New cupboard handles, polished floorboards and a fresh coat of paint can give an old-fashioned kitchen an attractive new look.

Good light is especially important in the kitchen. In an older-style, single-storey house, for example, a skylight can improve natural lighting in this area.

9 THE FIRST IMPRESSION

Potential buyers get their first impression of your house when they approach it from the street — and first impressions count.

Your house may be immaculate inside, but an untidy front lawn, weeds and overgrown shrubs can put otherwise interested people off. So before you put the house on the market, its exterior and gardens



Effective use of lighting and mirrors, and a choice of light colours, can turn a dark, cramped bathroom into one with plenty of space and light.

A neat and tidy low-maintainance backyard that incorporates entertaining space may be what many buyers are looking for.

should be tidy. As soon as a 'for sale' sign is up, you can expect your agent to bring interested buyers for an inspection.

Professional landscaping may increase the value of a house, but as with so many other home improvements, it's very much dependent on the quality of the work done, the area you live in and the housing market. What's important is that your garden or courtyard looks good.

Attend to the garden well in advance of the sale to give plants a chance to become established. Depending on the season, plant annuals before you put the house on the market; a touch of colour will brighten up the garden.

Once interested buyers have decided your house is worth a look, make sure the rest of its appearance won't let you down. The front porch, door and entrance hall should all be clean and the doorbell and lights working.

10 PROFESSIONAL RESULTS

Only 'do-it-yourself' if you have the skills to achieve professional-looking results.

Some work associated with your renovation must be done by licensed professionals (electrical wiring, for example), but you can do lots of other jobs yourself. However, a sloppy, unprofessional finish can put potential buyers off.

Attending decorating or hobby courses can give you ideas, improve your skills and boost your confidence on the home improvement front. DIY can lower your expenses considerably — but be prepared to put in time and effort.

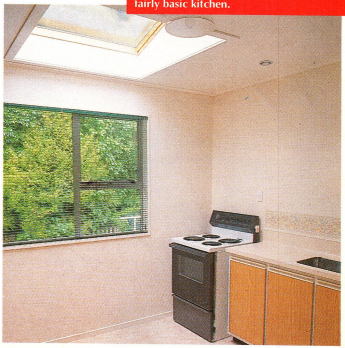
If you're less of a handyperson but still want to keep the costs of cosmetic house improvements low, check with the tradesperson you're using whether you can do some preliminary work such as preparing the garden for landscaping, stripping off paint or wallpaper, taking out old carpet or sanding floorboards.

11 MAINTAIN THE CHARACTER

Make sure the renovations maintain or complement your house's original character.

Any distinctive architectural style will lose its appeal if it's been altered beyond recognition over the years. This is especially important for old houses with a particular character (such as art deco, Victorian or Federation).

A skylight and cosmetic improvements can dramatically improve the appeal of even a fairly basic kitchen.



So if yours has a verandah that's been closed in at a later stage, for example, you could remove the enclosure and try to recapture the original architectural style as closely as possible.

The surrounding environment is equally important. Look around your neighbourhood — or check with your local council — to see whether people are renovating and what types of work they're doing.

12 CODES AND REGULATIONS

Make sure you have all necessary permits before the start of a renovation and a certificate upon completion.

Building work is generally subject to codes and regulations which may vary from state to state. Local councils authorise permits, monitor compliance with codes and issue certificates of compliance. Copies of these documents indicate to prospective buyers that the renovation is legal and complies with regulations.

Home improvement for profit — in a nutshell

- Renovate to improve your family's lifestyle, but **don't** assume that all projects will add value.
- Beware of overcapitalising. **Don't** try to raise the value of your house to more than 25% above the value of similar houses in your area, and **don't** spend more than 25% of the value of your house on a renovation project.
- Give your house a broad appeal — **don't** narrow the market with renovation projects that are unlikely to attract many people (such as adding a pool, spa or sauna).
- **Do** consider the type of people who are likely to buy a house in your area and customise your house to suit that market.
- **Do** maintain (or restore) the character of your home.
- Major projects (such as adding another storey, restumping your house or replacing the roof) usually **don't** increase the value of your house beyond cost. Seek expert advice about your particular situation first.
- **Do** make cosmetic improvements — painting, carpeting, polishing floorboards, cleaning.
- **Do** keep the decor neutral — unorthodox colours and styles may turn prospective buyers off.
- If your kitchen or bathroom needs updating, **don't** spend a fortune. New tiles, floors, fittings and facilities should match the style and price of your house.
- **Do** ensure that the outside of your home gives a good impression.
- **Do** present your house as clean and in good working order.
- **Do** get professionals to do your renovation, unless your DIY skills are good enough to achieve professional-looking results.
- **Do** get all plans and projects council-approved.

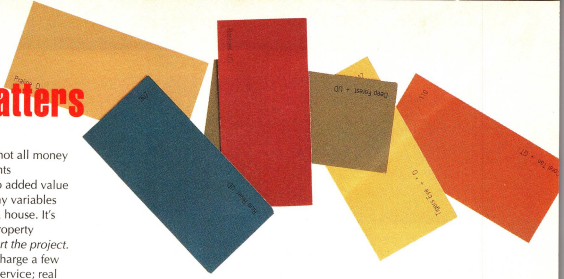
MAINTAINING STYLE

An extension can make a big difference — especially if the style and character of the building are maintained. When they added this rear extension to their house in Forrestville, Adelaide, NP and JH tried to replicate the symmetry of the front of the house — successfully, as the pictures show. The original, distinctive character of the front of the house is reflected in the design of the rear extension.

Inside, the floor plan was completely rearranged to accommodate a second bathroom and a family room. But according to the owners, gaining additional space was less important than maintaining the character of the house and making it appeal aesthetically.

In 1993 NP and JH were able to sell the house for about $80,000 more than they had bought it for two-and-a-half years earlier. If the costs for the renovation are deducted, their efforts netted them about $30,000.

Money matters



As our article makes clear, not all money spent on home improvements automatically translates into added value — there are simply too many variables that influence the value of a house. It's best to seek the advice of property professionals *before you start the project*. Registered valuers usually charge a few hundred dollars for such a service; real estate agents may offer advice free of charge.

However, the cost of a renovation also includes the cost of the finance, and you need to take this into account.

RAISING THE MONEY

Whichever way you pay for your renovation, it's going to cost you money. There are three basic options:

- **Using your reserves** to finance the renovation won't burden you with future repayments, but you'll lose the return your investment would otherwise have earned and you won't be able to use the money for other things.
- **Taking out a personal loan.** If you want to borrow money and pay it back over a fixed period of up to seven years, consider a personal loan. They are available at fixed interest rates (so you know what you'll be paying each month for the term of the loan) or at variable ones (where your payments can go up — or down — if interest rates change).
- **Increasing your mortgage** may be cheaper than a personal loan and give you longer to pay, but the mortgage is likely to be secured on your home — so if you default on your repayments, your home is at risk. There may also be extra fees for setting up the loan. Some mortgages may make a line of credit available (up to, say, $20,000) based on the value of your home and the amount of your equity in it. Your mortgage provider may also offer an interest rate closer to your mortgage rate than a personal loan — ask them.

The table below shows monthly repayments at a range of interest rates for each $1000 you borrow.

Our MONEY**CHOICE$** telephone service (1902 262 622) can give you comparative information on loans; you can also ask for a full report to be faxed or mailed to you. Calls are charged at $1.50 per minute — mobile and pay phones have higher rates.

Whether you increase your mortgage or take out another loan, assess carefully whether you'll be able to meet repayments if interest rates go up.

- If you plan the improvement project purely for value-adding purposes, its total cost (including interest payable or lost, and fees for property professionals, building applications and permits) should be lower than the amount by which you expect the value of the house to increase.

INCREASED VALUE, INCREASED COSTS

If you intend to continue living in your renovated house, check with your local council whether your planned renovation will increase the **rates** you have to pay. They're determined according to government valuations. Whether they're affected by house improvements depends on the state you live in and your council's regulations.

The more a house is worth, the more the buyer will have to pay in **stamp duty** on the purchase. That's probably not your concern as a seller, but when you're weighing up the costs of renovation or selling and buying, you should take into account the stamp duty you'll have to pay. The rate of stamp duty payable varies from state to state; it operates on a sliding scale based on the value of the purchase.

TAX IMPLICATIONS

Generally no **capital gains tax** is payable on the capital gain made from the sale of a house if:

- You bought it before September 20, 1985 — unless you've made major capital improvements which are used for income-producing purposes (such as adding an office, or a room you're renting out).
- You bought it on or after September 20, 1985 **and** it has been your sole or principal residence for the whole time you've owned it **and** you haven't used it for any income-producing purposes.

You may qualify for a partial exemption if you fulfil only some of the conditions — for example, if you've rented it out for a while or if it's been your principal residence for most, but not all, of the time you owned it. For more information on partial exemptions, phone the Australian Taxation Office in your state or territory for a copy of the booklet *Capital gains tax and your home*.

Monthly repayments for each $1000 you borrow

Interest rate	Term (years) 1	3	5	10	20	25
9%	$87.29	$31.64	$20.59	$12.48	$8.77	$8.15
10%	$87.72	$32.07	$21.04	$12.98	$9.37	$8.78
12%	$88.56	$32.92	$21.94	$13.99	$10.59	$10.08
15%	$89.81	$34.21	$23.30	$15.56	$12.48	$12.08
18%	$91.05	$35.49	$24.67	$17.17	$14.41	$14.11

Note: Different home loans with the same quoted rate may have slightly higher repayments because of the way the interest is calculated.

If you have a medical condition that can be treated surgically, what are your choices? Should you opt for a new type of operation? Do you really need surgery at all? We look at what you should consider before going under the knife.

The cutting edge of surgery

IF YOU WANT TO PLAY AN ACTIVE role in making decisions about your health care, you need objective information about your treatment options, particularly if it seems you might need an operation. But it can be difficult enough for doctors, let alone patients, to get that objective information.

You can't expect your GP to have in-depth knowledge of every new treatment, including all types of surgery. And surgeons might have differing opinions about the comparative risks and benefits of various operations and which option would be best for you.

Part of the problem is that most treatments — surgical and medical — haven't been evaluated for safety and effectiveness in controlled trials, so surgeons may recommend a procedure not because it's been proven to work, but simply because they're familiar with it and have done it for years or because it's the latest thing.

New drugs must be extensively tested before being introduced into Australia, but that's not always the case with new surgical treatments. They're often introduced without being fully tested, the long-term side effects are unknown and surgeons, however experienced, may find it difficult to learn a new technique.

The keyhole revolution

A wide range of operations now uses a 'minimally invasive' or 'keyhole' technique. This involves inserting a 'telescope' (called an endoscope), equipped with a light and miniature camera, into one of four small cuts in your skin (about 1 cm wide).

Tiny instruments can be passed through tubes in the other holes, and major surgery (such as removing a gallbladder) can be carried out by manipulating them with the aid of a video monitor. The diseased organ is removed by squeezing it through one of the holes.

Endoscopes can probe various parts of the body — laparoscopes, for example, are used to diagnose and treat a range of abdominal abnormalities, arthroscopes probe knees, shoulders, wrists and ankles, and hysteroscopes shed light on the womb.

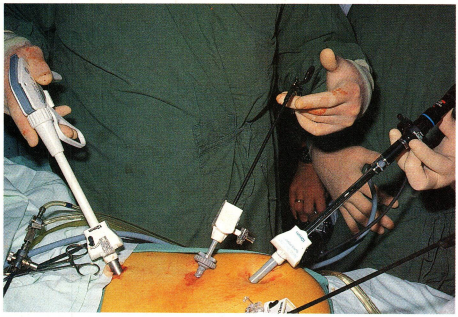
Keyhole surgery has become very popular because it requires only small incisions instead of a larger wound, and is said to involve less pain after the operation, less time in hospital and a more speedy recovery and return to everyday life.

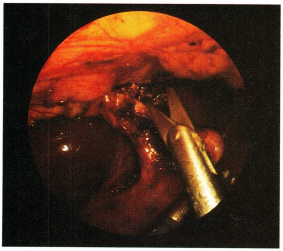
However, in many countries keyhole surgery was introduced before its safety and effectiveness were established. Indeed, evidence is growing that it has additional hazards to conventional surgery, such as an increased risk of damage to organs and blood vessels.

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons was heavily involved in the introduction of new keyhole techniques in Australia, and this seems to have prevented the worst of the problems experienced in other countries. However, while the risk of *major* complications is not high (it's estimated at less than 1% of Australian patients), we don't really know what complication rates are overall, because there is no requirement or facility for doctors to record them.

GUIDELINES

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons has developed guidelines for introducing new technologies like keyhole surgery and it "strongly encourages" the training of established surgeons in new techniques and accreditation by hospi-





Above: Keyhole surgery should involve a smaller wound, less pain, less time in hospital and a faster return to normal life — but there can still be complications.
Left: Keyhole surgery is very common for gallbladder removal, but a recent study suggests its advantages may be fewer than originally thought.

tals. However, there is no formal testing to evaluate surgeons' performance.

CHOICE thinks there should be a register of specialists who have undergone training and have experience in keyhole surgery and other new techniques.

At the moment, you'll have to make do with asking your surgeon how experienced he or she is in the particular technique — ask them how many of these operations they've done, how often they've had to convert to open surgery and what their complication rate is. To be really at home with laparoscopic techniques, they should perform these operations frequently — at least every week or so.

CHOICE would also like to see mandatory auditing of all surgical procedures and the establishment of a national database to keep a check on complication rates, particularly for new techniques.

GALLBLADDER SURGERY

One of the most popular types of keyhole surgery is laparoscopic cholecystectomy (removal of the gallbladder because of troublesome gallstones). Introduced into Australia in 1990, it has already superseded the traditional 'open' operation — about 90% of gallstone surgery is now laparoscopic.

Keyhole removal of the gallbladder is said to have several advantages over the old operation. Apart from having only four puncture points instead of a wider wound, doctors say you may be able to go home after only a day or two in hospital instead of more than a week, which is typical after the open operation. In addition, you should be able to resume your normal activities more quickly.

However, contrary to expectation, a recent UK study comparing traditional gallbladder surgery (using the smallest cut necessary) with the keyhole version found the keyhole operation took longer to perform, was probably more expensive and offered no significant benefit in terms of hospital stay or post-operative recovery. In the study, neither ward staff nor patients knew which of the operations had been done. Well conducted, randomised trials such as this are unusual in surgery: we'd like to see more such trials done to find out whether new surgical procedures really are as good as they're claimed to be.

COMPLICATIONS

In skilled hands, keyhole gallbladder surgery has relatively few complications. However, in some countries surgeons, fearful of being left behind if they stuck to old methods, started practising the new procedure without being properly trained, sometimes with serious consequences.

It can take a long time for even experienced surgeons to gain the necessary eye-hand co-ordination and it's not uncommon for them to make serious slips while learning the new method. Some surgeons may have difficulties and need to switch to the traditional open method in the middle of a keyhole operation.

A recent Australian study suggests there are twice as many bile duct injuries with laparoscopic gallbladder operations as with the old method, and bowel damage is also of concern.

DO YOU REALLY NEED SURGERY?

Another concern is the dramatic increase in gallbladder operations since the introduction of keyhole surgery. This may mean some people are having surgery unnecessarily.

Keyhole surgery may be attractive because it seems quick and simple, but like any operation it involves a degree of risk — the risk associated with having a general anaesthetic, of uncontrollable bleeding, organ damage or post-operative infection.

So it's advisable to undergo surgery only if it's necessary — in the case of gallstones, only have your gallbladder removed if scans confirm your symptoms (recurring abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting) are caused by stones and not some other condition. If you have stones but no symptoms, you don't need an operation. Many people have gallstones which cause them no trouble and should therefore be left alone.

HERNIA AND APPENDIX KEYHOLES

Until the UK gallbladder study, the only keyhole procedures that had been trialled properly were laparoscopic appendix and hernia operations (a hernia is a protrusion of an abdominal organ through the wall that normally holds it in).

Analysis shows that for these procedures the laparoscopic approach may trade off some of its advantages over traditional operations for some disadvantages. If you have the traditional hernia operation, for example, you can have the procedure done in a day surgery and you may only need a local, not a general, anaesthetic. After laparoscopic hernia surgery, the complication rate is higher (artery damage is not uncommon) and the hernia may recur. And after keyhole appendix or hernia surgery, people generally resume their normal activities no sooner than after open operations.

Keyhole surgery is also being used to remove diseased segments of bowel in colon cancer. However, many complications have been recorded, and some reports suggest cancer cells may be spread when cancerous tissue is squeezed out through the small incisions.

Lasers

Lasers are also at the cutting edge of surgery. They're used for a wide variety of operations, from removing birthmarks to opening clogged arteries.

Their beams of light energy can cut tissue precisely and close off blood vessels at the same time. But some types of laser surgery — laser prostate surgery, for example — are still considered to be experimental and more risky than conventional treatments.

PROSTATE PROBLEMS

Many men develop bladder trouble as they get older because their prostate gland (which surrounds part of the male urine tube or urethra) has become enlarged. You should see your doctor if you have symptoms (such as having to pass urine frequently), so you can have tests to diagnose whether you have a benign condition or prostate cancer.

For simple prostate enlargement, 'watchful waiting' to see if the problem resolves without any treatment is the best approach, according to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). If symptoms don't improve over time, surgery may help — though it may also sometimes cause urinary incontinence and impotence.

Can your short-sightedness be corrected by laser surgery? Perhaps — but it can't guarantee a complete cure yet.

The Cochrane Collaboration

At present there is little readily accessible information for either doctors or consumers about which surgical treatments have proved successful in properly controlled trials. But the Cochrane Collaboration, an international organisation of health professionals and consumers, established in 1992, is taking steps to improve the situation.

Its aim is to produce reviews of the evidence of the effectiveness of particular treatments. It has already produced a number of reports on various medical treatments, but as yet there is none on surgical procedures, though research is under way.

The Australasian Cochrane Centre is based at the Flinders Medical Centre in Adelaide. For further information phone (08) 8204 5399; fax (08) 8276 3305. Consumer inquiries are welcome.

For many years the standard operation has been 'transurethral prostatectomy' — an endoscope and cutting instruments reach the prostate through the urethra, so no external incision is necessary. A newer method involves using a laser to destroy the excess tissue.

Although it reduces bleeding, the laser technique requires longer use of a catheter to drain urine and, in unskilled hands, the urethra may be burnt, making passing urine painful for some time. It's not yet known if long-term complications may develop or how soon the procedure may need to be repeated.

LASER EYE SURGERY

It's important your doctor explains the risks, benefits and success rates of any surgery. Considering the media hype that always seems to accompany the introduction of new medical 'breakthroughs', it's not surprising many people have unrealistic expectations of what a new surgical technique can do for them.

For example, growing numbers of short-sighted people are having laser eye surgery in the hope that they'll be able to throw away their glasses and contact lenses. In skilled hands, this has proved a very successful operation in many cases — but there's no guarantee you'll

be able to see perfectly after the operation, and it's not known whether it might have any adverse long-term side effects.

Called photorefractive keratectomy (PRK), the 20-30-minute procedure involves directing short bursts of ultraviolet light from a laser at the cornea (the transparent part of the front of the eye). The aim is to reshape its surface to improve focusing.

The exact amount of tissue to be removed is preprogrammed according to your eye measurements. However, your surgeon won't be able to predict just how successful the operation will be in your case, as each person's 'natural healing response' is different. Results for severely short-sighted people generally aren't as good as for the mildly short-sighted.

YOU MIGHT STILL NEED GLASSES

In most cases the operation will improve your sight, but some people will still have to wear glasses some of the time, such as for driving at night. Most middle-aged and older people will need glasses for reading anyway (because the lenses of the eyes stiffen as we get older) — and this operation won't change that.

Don't expect instant normal sight either. You might find your vision is blurry and hazy for some weeks or even months after the operation. You might need another operation if your focus hasn't been corrected enough (this should be done free of charge). And if too much tissue has been vaporised, you might have to wear reading glasses prematurely.

Only one eye is treated at a time, so you'll still need to wear glasses or a contact lens for the other eye for a while too. You shouldn't consider having it done until your first has settled down — generally, at least three months later.

Think carefully before having PRK — and make sure you have enough money for the operation, as it's not covered by Medicare or private health insurance and will cost you around $2500 per eye.

According to the NHMRC, glasses and contact lenses still provide the safest, most effective and affordable treatment for short-sightedness. Some eye surgeons are offering laser surgery to correct long-sightedness, but this procedure is still experimental — it's wise to wait for proven results.

NO LASERS YET FOR HEART SURGERY

Lasers have also been used to unblock coronary (heart) arteries clogged by fatty deposits. However, laser heart surgery carries an unacceptably high risk of complications (including burning a hole in a coronary artery or damaging surrounding tissue), so at present it's not considered a treatment option in Australia.

BREAST CANCER GUIDE

When Joan Williams was told she had breast cancer, she was in a state of shock. "I felt incapable of making decisions about which treatment I should have," she said. Even after a second opinion, what she really wanted was access to some written material which contained the pros and cons of surgical alternatives at a glance.

GPs may not be up-to-date with the latest research in a particular area and surgeons don't always agree on the best treatment, so patients don't always get the details they need. But fortunately for thousands of Australian women like Joan who are coming to terms with recently diagnosed breast cancer, objective information about treatment options — in language easily understood by people with no medical knowledge — is now available.

Last October, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) released its guidelines for the treatment of early breast cancer. Two sets of guidelines are available — one for health professionals and one in plain English for consumers.

Decisions based on evidence

Designed to help both women and their doctors decide on the most appropriate treatment options, the guidelines are the first in Australia for the management of any disease based on the best available evidence.

One of the findings of numerous international studies, for example, is that women who have only their breast lump and some surrounding tissue excised ('lumpectomy' or 'breast conservation surgery') have the same survival rate as those who have their whole breast removed ('mastectomy').

Hopefully, the guidelines will encourage doctors to involve their patients more in making treatment decisions. Surgeons today are becoming increasingly aware how important it is for women to be able to understand and make up their own minds about their treatment.

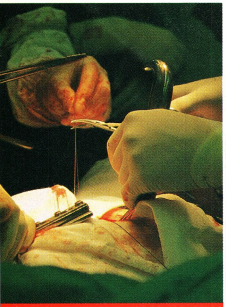
And growing numbers of women are seeking treatment from an expert in the field, with good reason. Research has shown that women with breast cancer who are treated by surgeons who specialise in breast cancer and see a lot of women with the disease do much better than those who are referred to surgeons who treat the disease only occasionally.

The vital ingredients

Joan knows it's important, particularly if you're having surgery for a life-threatening disease like cancer, not only to have access to the facts about various treatments, but also to feel free to discuss your choices both with your doctors and with people who have coped with the illness themselves. She has been the grateful recipient of breast cancer support services herself and now co-ordinates a group in her area.

If you're about to have a major operation, ask your doctor for information about the disease, treatment choices and support groups that may be able to help you. If you have cancer, your state cancer council organisation can be a great source of information and support.

And if you have breast cancer, ask for a copy of *Early Breast Cancer — A Consumer's Guide*. It's available from the National Breast Cancer Centre in Sydney (phone (02) 9334 1700) or from the NHMRC's publications officer (phone 1800 020 103).



Any operation involves risk — be absolutely sure there's no alternative before agreeing to one.

Affairs of the heart

If you have angina, your doctor might suggest you have a procedure called angioplasty in the hope of delaying or even avoiding the need for coronary artery bypass surgery. It involves threading a tube tipped with a tiny balloon through to the blockage in the coronary artery, where the balloon is inflated to flatten the plaque against the artery wall.

Angioplasty requires only a local anaesthetic and one to three days in hospital. But like any heart operation, it involves risks (such as having a heart attack or dying during or after the procedure).

Evidence so far suggests that, although angioplasty gives greater relief from angina than medication, it causes more complications — and you may need either to have the procedure repeated or to undergo bypass surgery within a year. So check with your doctors whether angioplasty really is the best choice in your case.

NO MAGICAL FIX

Surgery isn't a magical fix. Angioplasty, coronary artery bypass and new treatments like stenting (where blocked arteries are held open by metal coils) can reduce heart pain, but they don't treat the underlying causes of heart disease. Particularly if you don't change food and exercise habits, arteries can become blocked again by fatty deposits.

Questions to ask

If, after discussing your condition and its treatment, you and your GP decide that surgery is an option, you will be referred to a surgeon. It's important to find a surgeon whose technique you trust and whose attitude you like. If you have doubts about your surgeon's advice or ability, ask for a second opinion.

Here's a checklist of general questions to ask your doctors.

Ask your GP

- Why are you recommending this particular surgeon? Hopefully, not simply because he or she is a friend or is the only surgeon in the area your GP has heard of, but because this surgeon has a particular interest and reputation in the type of operation you might need. Ideally, the surgeon will also have operating rights at a major local public hospital, as he or she must have proven expertise to get a position there.

Ask your surgeon

- Is this surgery really necessary? What will it involve?
- Can I have time to think about it? What will happen if I decide to wait for six months to a year or if I don't have the operation at all?
- To what extent will the operation relieve my symptoms?
- Why do you think this is the best operation for me?
- What alternatives are there? What are their success rates and side effects?
- Will you be using a new technique? If so, why is it better than conventional surgery?
- What are the risks associated with the operation?
- What tests will I need? Why? Are there any risks associated with them? (Don't forget to ask about the results and what they mean.)
- What training have you done since you completed your surgical qualifications?
- How many of these operations have you done before? What is your success rate?
- What will it cost?
- Where else can I go for information? Is there any written information?
- Do you mind if I get a second opinion? Even if he/she does mind, you're entitled to get one anyway.
- Make sure your doctor has explained the pros and cons of the operation you're scheduled for before you sign the surgery consent form.

New for women

While some surgeons may embrace new treatments too readily, others may cling to old techniques that have no proven value.

An example of this is the gynaecological procedure called dilatation and curettage (D&C), used traditionally to treat heavy menstrual bleeding. Specialists agree it's generally ineffective, unnecessary and grossly overused. It can also be harmful — yet D&C remains the most common gynaecological operation in our hospitals.

Often an operation isn't necessary for menstrual bleeding problems. But where it is, a newer procedure called hysteroscopy has been shown to be more useful and less traumatic than D&C.

A hysteroscope is passed through the vagina to view the uterus. An instrument may sometimes be inserted through it to destroy abnormalities, such as polyps and fibroids (benign tumours).

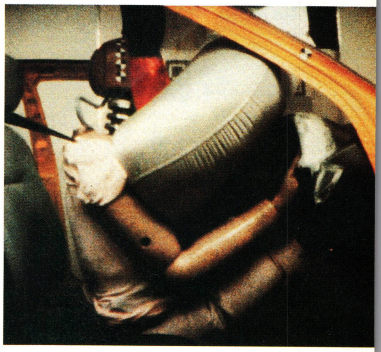
Hysterectomy (removal of the womb) has been used to treat many disorders. However, once cancer has been excluded, if you suffer from chronically heavy menstrual bleeding, other treatments such as hormonal medications should generally be tried before you undergo a hysterectomy.

If you need an operation, try to find a surgeon with experience in minimally invasive surgery. For many women, destroying only the lining of the womb (endometrial resection or ablation) by using a rollerball heated by an electric current, an electrically heated wire loop or a laser — all with the aid of a hysteroscope — is preferable to having a hysterectomy. You generally need only a day or so in hospital, and will have less pain after the operation, as well as a speedier recovery.

There are also reportedly fewer complications with these minimally invasive procedures than after hysterectomy. But questions remain about their safety and effectiveness (you may still need a hysterectomy), as well as their long-term consequences. ❑

Airbag safety

All the evidence shows airbags save lives and prevent injuries. However, if you think car airbags are like big fluffy pillows, you may be surprised to hear that during an accident they inflate with great force at speeds of around 200 km/h, and have been known to cause injuries.



AIRBAGS ARE FITTED TO CARS to protect the driver and in some cases the front-seat passenger during frontal and front-angled collisions.

Airbags are most effective when used in conjunction with seatbelts, and are designed to reduce injuries to the upper body and face by helping to stop you being thrown against the windscreen, steering wheel and other hard surfaces during an accident. However, they don't protect you in roll-over, rear, side or low-speed collisions, although some car manufacturers, such as Volvo, are fitting side-impact airbag systems to some of their models.

SEATBELTS ARE YOUR FIRST DEFENCE

Not all accidents are severe enough to trigger an airbag — which is just as well, since the seatbelt should provide adequate protection in low-speed collisions, and replacing your airbag can be expensive. Airbag systems for the Australian market tend to be designed to act in higher-speed accidents than those made for the US market, where seatbelt usage is much lower than in Australia.

AIRBAGS CAN CAUSE INJURY...

Airbags inflate in a fraction of a second and with great force. This means that if the front-seat occupants of the car are not properly seated and strapped in with seatbelts or are obstructing an airbag compartment with part of their body, they may be injured. There have been reports in the US of children sitting in

SAFETY TIPS

Airbags are a secondary safety device, which means they're designed to reduce injuries once a crash is happening. (Primary safety devices, such as brakes, steering and anti-lock braking, are designed to help you avoid having an accident in the first place — obviously a preferable option.)

While airbags can sometimes cause injury, they do save lives, and there are ways of minimising the risk of injury.

GENERAL SAFETY

- All occupants of the car should wear a seatbelt, irrespective of whether the car is fitted with airbags.
- Avoid sitting too close to the airbag compartment, and don't obstruct it with any part of your body. Airbags inflate with great force and could seriously injure you if you sit too close. This means drivers shouldn't hunch over the steering wheel, and passengers shouldn't lean or put their feet up on the dashboard.
- Don't cover the airbag compartment or place any objects between you and the airbag, including dashboard covers.
- Any maintenance or repair work on the electrical system, steering column, dashboard area, steering wheel or airbag system are best carried out by an authorised repair person.

If you're a 'do-it-yourselfer', contact the manufacturer to find out whether you need to disable the airbag in order to carry out repairs. The Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce (VACC) has produced a $20 wall chart guide to the safe handling of vehicles with airbags. For further information call VACC on (03) 9829 1111. Its basic advice is: if you're not competent with airbags, don't touch them.

- Fitting a bullbar or making some other modification to the front of the car could change the impact speed which triggers the airbag, reducing its effectiveness — check with the manufacturer before doing so.

the front seat or lying in a rear-facing child restraint mounted in the front seat being crushed to death by airbags in low-speed accidents, which they might have otherwise survived.

According to Michael Griffiths at the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, it is common practice to carry small children in the front seat in the US and Europe. In Australia they're generally in the back because our child restraints usually can't be fitted in the front seat. As long as this doesn't change we shouldn't have the same problem with children being injured, he says.

However, Australian adults still need to be cautious (see *Safety tips*, below) — there have been reports in the US of airbags causing bruises, broken arms, eye damage and adult fatalities.

... BUT THEY DO SAVE LIVES

Despite the occasional problems, airbags in most cases do prevent serious injury and save lives.

For example, General Motors Holden says there has been a 'dramatic' reduction in facial, head and chest injuries to occupants of airbag-equipped Commodores involved in accidents.

The US-based Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has also compared driver deaths in airbag-equipped cars to cars without airbags. The research found there were 23% fewer deaths in airbag-equipped cars involved in frontal and front-angled crashes. ❑

■ If you're in a low-speed accident, don't be surprised if the airbag doesn't go off. In most cases it simply means the accident wasn't serious enough for the airbag to deploy.

CHILDREN AND AIRBAGS

■ Children should sit in the back seat of a car and use a seatbelt or child restraint. Where the front seat has to be used, it should be moved as far back as possible from the airbag.

■ Never fit a rear-facing child restraint to the front passenger seat. In fact, it's always better to install a child restraint of any type in the rear seat.

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Our 21st draw will be held on October 4, 1996. Two lucky people will win prizes from tests published in CHOICE in February and March 1996.

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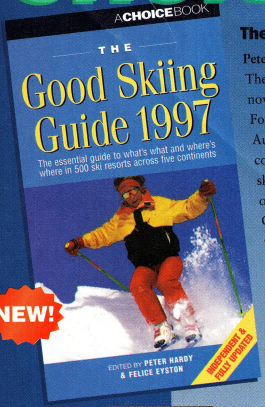
Travel is produced by the UK Consum ers' Association and reprinted by CHOICE four times a year. While its reports are from the perspective of a European base, much of the information in them is just as useful to an Australian travelling in Europe and the USA, with occasional forays further afield. There's quality information about different regions, accommodation, specialities of lo cal cuisine, sights to see, as well as places to avoid and tips on dealing with holiday hassles.

A subscription to *Travel* costs just $27 a year — you can use the form on this page to subscribe. The latest issue features:

- Catalonia, Spain
- Neapolitan Riviera, Italy
- North Yorkshire, UK
- The Carolinas, USA

CHOICE BOOKS



The Good Skiing Guide 1997

Peter Hardy and Felice Eyston (eds)

The only independent guide to over 500 ski resorts around the world, now in its eleventh edition and for the first time available in Australia. Focusing especially on Europe and North America but also including Australian and NZ information, this definitive ski resort reference guide contains lively, unbiased descriptions of the skiing, character and après-ski amenities of over 500 top resorts across five continents, with details of prices, ski schools, snowboarding, accommodation and childcare. Colour maps throughout illustrate the best runs. It includes:

- A league table of the world's top resorts, with at-a-glance verdicts.
- Assessments of the resorts' suitability — for children, beginners, intermediates and experts.
- Full-colour maps showing lift locations and the number and grades of runs.

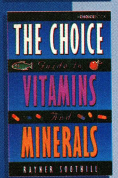
$25 **paperback 592 pp**
Code: SKIG

A-Z of Chemicals in the Home

Total Environment Centre

This is an easy-to-use alphabetical directory of the household products and chemicals commonly found around the home. Each entry describes the product or chemical, its health and environmental effects, and gives alternatives, if any are available. Important information about poisons, a glossary of terms, and a further reading list add to the book's useful nature.

$15 **paperback 168 pp**
Code: AZCH



The CHOICE Guide to Vitamins and Minerals

Rayner Soothill

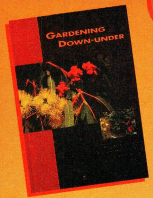
This popular book examines the issues and explains the ins and outs of vitamins and minerals. It covers topics such as: the best food sources of vitamins; the risks if you eat too much or too little of a vitamin; and answers to commonly asked questions (for example, does vitamin C cure a cold? Will vitamins help you cope with stress?).

$16 subscribers/$18 non-subscribers **paperback 240 pp**
Code: CGVM

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is becoming an increasingly popular alternative to modern medicine. Some practices, such as acupuncture, have become very much accepted already; others are less well known. Rey Tiquia, a respected practitioner and teacher, explains the philosophy and practices of TCM, including herbal and food medicine, massage (tuina) and preventive medicine, and how to make the most out of a consultation.

$18 subscribers/$20 non-subscribers **paperback 192 pp**
Code: TCM

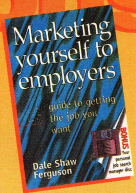
Consumer



Gardening Down-under

Gardening Down-under will help you work out what type of soil you have, and how to improve it and the success of your plants. Some of the topics include soil acidity and alkalinity, no-dig gardens, organic matter, fertilisers, watering, lawns, growing and fertilising plants in pots, and gardening with salty water. Colour photographs support the text.

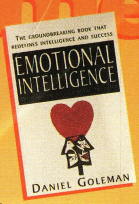
$35 Code: GDDU



Marketing Yourself to Employers

Everything you need to consider when looking for a job, including sections on effective use of networks, telephones and résumés, how to handle difficult questions at the interview and what to do when you get an offer. It comes with a stand-alone Windows disk to assist you in your job search.

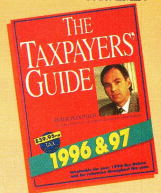
$30 Code: MYTE



Emotional Intelligence

This best-selling book by Daniel Goleman persuasively argues that our emotions play a powerful role in determining individual success, and that you can develop and nurture emotional intelligence.

$20 Code: EMIN



The Taxpayers' Guide 1996 & 97

It's tax time, and we have selected *The Taxpayers' Guide 1996 & 97* to help you prepare your tax return. It's been designed to be used in conjunction with *Tax Pack* and the author, Peter McDonald, is the National Director of the Australian Taxpayers' Association.

$40 Code: TAX

Postage-free

How to Buy a Computer

CHOICE journalist John Pospisil has written an easy-to-understand guide to buying a computer. In plain, unbiased language *How to Buy a Computer* offers a wealth of practical advice about: deciding whether you really need a computer; the system you need; what you can use a computer for; the purchasing experience and getting what you want; and the Mac/PC debate.

$10 Code: HBC

Order Form

Code	Title	Qty	Item price	Total price

Plus postage and handling ($3 for one item plus $1.20 for each extra item)* _____

How to Buy a Computer* is postage-free. **Total _____

I enclose: ❑ cheque ❑ money order (payable to the Australian Consumers' Association)

OR, I wish to pay by: ❑ Bankcard ❑ Mastercard ❑ Visa ❑ Amex Expiry Date ____ / ____

Card number ____

Signature .....

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms ..... (First name) ..... (Last name)

Address ..... Postcode .....

Phone (business hours) ..... Subscriber number .....

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Money-back guarantee:
If you are not completely satisfied with your purchase, return book(s) within 30 days for full refund of the purchase price.

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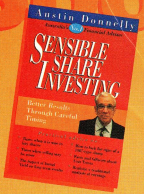
Postage & Handling
$3 for one item plus $1.20 for each extra item ordered. Some books may have to be sent separately to keep postage costs down. This is due to Australia Post's vagaries, not ours. Please allow 3 to 4 weeks for delivery.

If any order cannot be filled for a substantial length of time, we'll let you know and give you the option of cancellation.

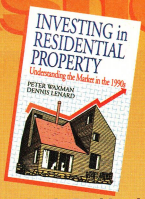
Bookshelf



Sensible Share Investing

The topics this book covers include the timing of both selling and purchasing, the warning signs of a slump, the pros and cons of unit trusts, and how to analyse your shares' performance.

$25 Code: Code: SSI



Investing in Residential Property

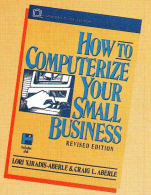
Whether you're buying a home or planning an investment, this book will help you understand the residential market and the factors which influence it, such as economic cycles, taxation policy, the cost of finance, construction costs and more.

$25 Code: IIRP

Delivering the Goods

This isn't just a book for frontline sales staff but for anyone who supplies goods or information. It presents clear, practical advice and checklists to help you and your company maintain and improve customer service.

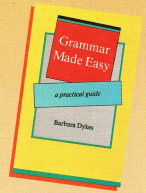
$25 Code: DTG



How to Computerize Your Small Business

Although this is an American book, it is also relevant in Australia — the advice it offers to those wanting to computerise their small business is excellent. It includes a sample business program.

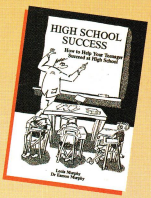
$30 Code: HCYB



Grammar Made Easy

This book will help you improve your grammar or explain it to your child. Through a series of simple exercises it looks at all the common mistakes, plus punctuation and the parts of speech.

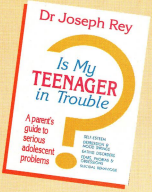
$17 Code: GME



High School Success

High school means a big change in a student's life. *High School Success* offers parents practical advice on a range of issues, such as choosing the right school, exams, homework, stress and success.

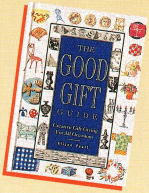
$17 Code: HSS



Is My Teenager in Trouble?

When does a 'difficult' teenager become a person with a real problem? This book is designed to help parents spot the signs. Some of the problem areas it covers are stress, phobias, school, eating disorders and suicidal behaviour.

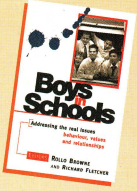
$18 Code: IMTT



The Good Gift Guide

Gift-giving can be a wonderful experience; it can also be torture to find that special present. *The Good Gift Guide* not only has wonderful ideas for gifts for all sorts of occasions, it also includes information about wrapping, cards and last-minute gifts.

$17 Code: TGGG



Boys in Schools

Problems facing boys in schools include bullying, gender stereotyping, low self-esteem, homophobia and peer pressure. This book looks at some of the innovative techniques being used to deal with these problems.

$20 Code: BIS

Choosing and using a lawyer

There's no easy way to find a lawyer who suits you, but once found, you need to work as a team if you want to achieve the outcome you're looking for.

THERE ARE SEVERAL IMPORTANT factors you need to consider before employing a lawyer:

- Do you really need one? (See *Do you really need a lawyer?*, right.)
- If you do need a lawyer, do they have a current practising certificate and a good reputation?
- Do you communicate well with each other?
- How much are their services likely to cost you?

REPUTATION: A STARTING POINT

As with many services, word of mouth is often the best recommendation. When looking for a lawyer, start by asking family and friends if they can recommend someone — particularly if their case was similar to yours.

Alternatively, the law society or institute in your state's capital city can give you names of lawyers practising or specialising in the field you require.

Also, your local community legal centre or Legal Aid Commission may be able to recommend a solicitor — look them up under 'Community help' at the front of the White Pages phone book or under 'Legal Aid Commission'.

On the other hand, if the legal help you need is for something standard such as conveyancing, consider looking in the Yellow Pages for a lawyer in your area.

SHOPPING AROUND

Ideally, collect the names of at least three solicitors and ring all of them so you can compare quotes. In some cases only an estimate will be possible, particularly if your case is likely to end up in court.

When you first ring up, start by briefly explaining the nature of your case and asking if the law firm has experience in the area. For straightforward matters such as making a will or buying or selling your home, quotes will usually be for a flat fee. More complex matters are usually charged on an hourly basis.

Ask how much an initial consultation will cost — some law firms offer a short (20 to 30 minutes) initial consultation for nothing, or for a nominal fee. Be sure to check if the firm regards the initial consultation as the first time you meet the lawyer, or the first meeting *after* you agree to employ them. Otherwise, you could end up paying for a consultation you thought was free.

POWER IMBALANCE

Although shopping around is probably the best way to find a good lawyer, not everyone feels comfortable doing it. As NSW Legal Services Commissioner Steve Mark points out, "You're requiring consumers to have the ability to negotiate — many people don't, like non-English speakers, people who lack competence or confidence, people who live in a small town where there are only one or two lawyers. It doesn't take into account the power imbalance that can exist between a lawyer and client."

If you or someone you know has difficulty speaking English, the law society in your state may know of a lawyer who speaks your native language. Some lawyers advertise in the Yellow Pages that they can cater for certain languages.

If you live in a 'one-lawyer town', we suggest you try calling the nearest community legal service and ask if the advice your local lawyer is giving seems reasonable.

PREPARING FOR THE FIRST MEETING

To ensure the first meeting is effective and the lines of communication don't become crossed, there are a few things you can prepare.

- Write down the facts as you understand them, particularly if your case is complicated. If possible, get it typed.
- Photocopy and collate all relevant documents. Don't take wads of irrelevant material — it wastes the solicitor's time and your money.
- Think about the questions you want to ask — write them down and take them with you.
- Be quite clear what you want to achieve in the resolution of the matter — write it down if you like. When you're with the lawyer, compare these expectations with what they advise. If the lawyer isn't telling you what you want to hear you could try another for a second opinion, but don't lose sight of the fact that they may be right and it's your expectations that are at fault.
- Don't be shy to be seen making notes at the meeting. It will help keep the lawyer on their toes, and remind you later of what was said.

THE FIRST MEETING

A good lawyer should be a good communicator, but it's just as important for you to communicate your needs. Communication breakdown in lawyer/client relationships has been a major source of complaint to the NSW Office of the Legal Services Commissioner (established in 1994 to deal with complaints about lawyers). However, the commission also found that the breakdown was just as likely to be on the side of the client as on that of the lawyer.

You need to feel comfortable speaking honestly and openly with your lawyer, asking about their experience in cases like yours, what costs you can expect and if they're prepared to keep you regularly informed about your case's progress.

Your lawyer needs to be able to explain things well and to make it quite clear when their advice differs from your expectations. They should be able to talk knowledgeably and frankly about options for solving your problem, what your chances of success are, and how long the matter is likely to take. If there is anything you don't understand, ask them to explain it until you do.

At this meeting, also consider the nature of your case and what style of lawyer you want. If you're in an 'adversarial' situation — in dispute with another person, company or institution — you may need someone with a tough style. But as one consumer involved in a divorce case said, "I had to think: do I want the meanest lawyer in town, or do I want someone who has more concern about the children and the eventual outcome?"

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

You should also use the first meeting to get clear information about fees and to establish the likely total cost of your case. From your shopping around, you should already know if a flat fee or hourly rate will be charged.

In most states 'scale fees' apply. These dictate the theoretical maximum a lawyer can charge you for certain types of work. Where they apply, lawyers can only charge more than the scale fee if you agree to it in writing.

The Commonwealth Government's Access to Justice Advisory Committee has recommended that scales be abolished in all states and replaced with written cost agreements between solicitor and client in all cases. But so far, this has only happened in NSW, although in the ACT scale fees have been abolished except in certain limited fields.

Nevertheless, double-check the lawyer's hourly rate, plus the rates for other people who might work on your case (such as paralegals in the law firm). Also

ANY KNOWN COMPLAINTS?

It's not easy to find out whether a lawyer has had a complaint filed against them for unsatisfactory professional conduct, or if they've been found guilty of misconduct. Law societies generally keep complaints against solicitors confidential.

The argument against making complaints records public is that some are considered to be "frivolous" or "vexatious" and many are not proven, so listing them would undeservedly affect the reputation of a lawyer.

While a register of all complaints remains contentious, CHOICE thinks a public register of *proven* complaints against practising solicitors should be readily available — as it is in Victoria through the Law Institute or the Solicitor's Board, for example.

DO YOU REALLY NEED A LAWYER?

Your problem may in fact not be a legal one at all, or you might be able to resolve it without calling in a solicitor. A common example is neighbourhood disputes, which can often be handled through a community mediation centre (see *Consumer-in-law*, September 1995).

How can you find out if your problem really does need a lawyer's help? If you live in NSW or Victoria, both the NSW Law Society and the Law Institute of Victoria have a community assistance phone service to help you decide whether you really have a legal problem — recorded messages cover various topics. The phone numbers are: NSW — (02) 9373 7300; Victoria — (03) 9602 5000. In other states, such as the ACT and SA, lunchtime or evening advice may be available.

The Law Society of WA also has a phone service, as well as a Shopfront Lawyer Service, which can help you determine whether you need legal assistance. It costs $15 for 20 minutes of advice. The contact number is (09) 221 4402.

And in the NT, the Legal Aid Commission offers limited free legal advice on weekdays, 9 am to 4 pm, on (08) 8999 3000 or 1800 019 343.

The Queensland Law Society has a free 10-minute legal advice consultation service, on 1800 017 719. It also has a fixed-fee consultation — $20 for 20 minutes, on (07) 3842 5888.

In addition, most law societies publish free pamphlets and information booklets on different areas of the law, which can also be helpful in deciding whether or not you need a solicitor.

ask for an estimate of the total cost, and where and why there could be variations on the estimate. If your case turns out to be more work than expected, your bill will be higher, and it's important the lawyer communicates this to you along the way.

If the fees quoted are out of your range, try negotiating something more suitable to your needs. If the lawyer isn't prepared to negotiate, don't commit yourself to something you can't afford — go elsewhere. Whomever you employ, make sure all details about expenses are put in writing up-front.

Depending on their experience (and probably the firm's overheads), a lawyer's hourly fee could range from $100 to $300. For a barrister to represent you in court, the daily rate could be from $250 to $5000 — it'll vary depending on which court you're in, how senior the barrister is and the type of case.

CAN'T AFFORD A LAWYER?

If you can't afford a lawyer you may be eligible for Legal Aid, but your income will probably be means-tested. If the test finds you're not eligible and you live in NSW or WA, your state law societies have programs under which solicitors agree to provide legal help in some cases either free (called 'pro bono') or for a reduced fee. Again, you may have to undergo a means test or meet other criteria.

Alternatively, if yours is an appropriate type of case, try to find a lawyer who'll take it on a 'no win/no fee' basis — see right. However, this won't guarantee you end up with no costs at all.

In Victoria and Queensland, you can now insure against some legal fees — ring the Law Institute or Society there for information (see contact numbers, right).

IF YOU HAVE TO GO TO COURT

If you have to go to court it will be difficult for your lawyer to give a firm estimate of costs, because how quickly — or slowly — your case progresses can depend on a number of factors outside their control: the other side's tactics, court delays, whether or not there's an appeal, costs orders that may be made, and so on.

In this case, it's important you ask for regular updates on costs already incurred and future estimates, otherwise you're likely to lose track of the expense.

You also need to agree on the method of payment — for example, how often accounts will be sent to you, what detail will be shown, whether you can pay by instalment, and what happens if your payment is overdue (in some cases, it may attract interest at a specified rate).

PUTTING IT IN WRITING

Once you've decided to employ the solicitor, you should enter into a written 'contract of disclosure', or a cost agreement, either at the first meeting or shortly after. Ask for one early on — it will indicate you're an informed consumer.

Contracts of disclosure and cost agreements are very similar. Whichever you decide on, make sure it includes the following:

- A description of the work your solicitor will do and the legal processes involved.
- The length of time the process should take, and the need for any unexpected delays to be explained to you.
- Who will be actually performing the work, and how to contact them.
- Any conflicts of interest that may affect the case or the solicitor's work.
- The costs involved — include the total sum or the hourly rate to be charged (including the rates of other people working on your case, such as paralegals). If an hourly fee is stated, an estimate of the time needed and the total cost should be included.
- The method of payment, how often accounts will be sent and when payment should be made.
- Also ask to have included a commitment from the solicitor that he or she will return your calls within one or two days, answer letters from you within five working days, and inform you of all new developments you would consider important within 10 working days.
- Determine whether payment by instalments is acceptable, and discuss any problems you might have paying your bills — it's better to be up-front so a mutually satisfactory payment system can be worked out.

In some states, the law requires a written disclosure of costs right from the start. Even if it isn't required, it's a good opportunity to have the needs and goals of both you and the lawyer clearly expressed in writing.

Don't feel pressured into signing an agreement at the first meeting — take it away with you and think about it. That way, if you have any more queries, they can be resolved and incorporated into the agreement. And remember — the more detailed it is, the less chance of dispute further down the road.

WHAT DO THE COSTS INCLUDE?

As well as your solicitor's actual fee, you'll have to pay for 'disbursements' — which are expenses like photocopying, and money your lawyer has to pay to other parties, such as for stamp duty, medical reports and so on. If your case goes to court, you'll also have to pay the barrister's fees. And even if you win your case and the judge awards you 'costs', it's unlikely they'll cover all your legal fees.

Ask for your lawyer's bills to be itemised (including disbursements), so you can check whether you think the costs are reasonable.

You could also ask if there's anything you can do to keep your costs down — for example, photocopying documents, or writing letters that your lawyer can review and sign. On the other hand, while your solicitor shouldn't make important decisions in the case without discussing them with you first, don't forget you hired him or her for expert advice and knowledge — don't try to take over the case.

NO WIN, NO FEE?

In NSW, Queensland, SA, Tasmania, and Victoria, 'no win/no fee' costs agreements between lawyers and clients are allowed under specific conditions.

Similar arrangements are under consideration in the ACT and WA. There is no formal structure in the NT, though many practitioners do offer this option.)

Under such an agreement, if the matter is successful the lawyer gets paid their normal fee, sometimes with a 'success premium' (if they've made a specific agreement with their client), which may be a percentage of the normal fee (its size varies between states).

There are sometimes limitations on these agreements: they can't be made for criminal trials, and they usually only relate to your lawyer's fees, not to disbursements.

Even if you enter a 'no win/no fee' agreement, you may have to bear some costs and expenses — including those of the other side's lawyers — if you lose. It's important to keep this in mind.

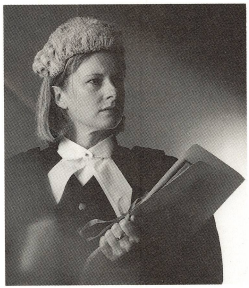
MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

It's a good idea to keep track of your case's progress — as well as helping you feel in control, it will enable you to monitor your lawyer's performance.

- Keep a file of the case with all documents and developments. Take notes during meetings or telephone calls with your lawyer — he or she certainly will.
- If you think your lawyer isn't keeping you informed of developments, write a letter asking for a *written* statement of progress.
- If you're worried about growing costs, raise the matter with your lawyer — they need to know how much you can afford before taking further action. The NSW Office of the Legal Services Commissioner says many of the complaints it receives are about overcharging, yet more often than not the client hasn't brought their concerns to their solicitor's attention. The best approach may be an unemotional letter, but if you need assistance with strategies, contact your local law society or institute for advice.
- If you want to meet your solicitor to resolve a disputed account, check first that they're not charging you for the meeting.

CHANGING LAWYERS

You can change your solicitor at any time, but of course it will cost you time



and money to bring the new one up to speed on the case. It may also not bring you the outcome you want if it's your expectations rather than the lawyer's skills that are at fault.

If you're not satisfied with your lawyer's work, start by writing to them, explaining your concerns and saying what you'd like done about it. If you receive no response — or no satisfactory response — write again, stating clearly that you don't want them to act for you any more.

Then pay your lawyer for work done up to your 'withdrawal of instructions'. If you don't pay your outstanding fees, the solicitor can claim 'lien' over the file, and refuse to give it to you. However, he or she may be prepared to give it to your new solicitor on condition that you personally won't receive it until you have paid what you owe.

Lien is a difficult and often unpleasant situation. It usually occurs because the lawyer believes you're not prepared to work out what they regard as a reasonable method of payment, or that even if you've offered such an undertaking, you don't intend to finish paying your fees.

The best solution for this is to sit down with your lawyer and negotiate a method of payment that is mutually agreeable. If the issue is dragging out and you need your files to complete your case, contact your state law society or institute for advice (in NSW, talk to the Office of the Legal Services Commissioner first).

Once you have access to your file again, make sure all the documents you're entitled to are included before taking it to your new solicitor. ❑

LAW SOCIETY/ INSTITUTE CONTACT NUMBERS

- **ACT:** (06) 247 5700.
- **NSW:** (02) 9926 0333; The Office of the Legal Services Commissioner: (02) 9233 8176.
- **NT:** (08) 8981 5104.
- **Queensland:** (07) 3842 5888.
- **SA:** (08) 8229 0222.
- **Tasmania:** (03) 6234 4133; Legal Aid Commission: 1300 366 611.
- **Victoria:** (03) 9607 9311.
- **WA:** (09) 221 3222.

FINDING A SPECIALIST

A non-specialist lawyer may be able to refer you to a specialist. In four states, however, law societies have a list of accredited specialists in some areas of the law.

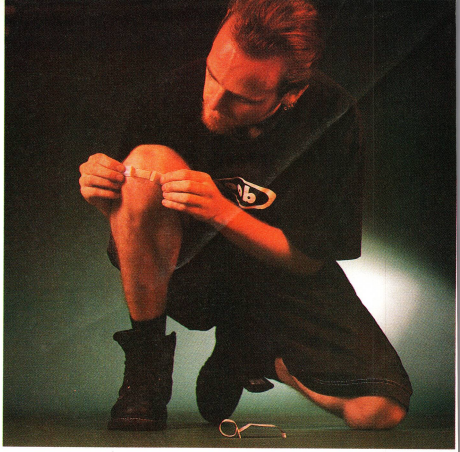
Accredited specialists must have at least five years' experience, have passed relevant examinations, and have at least 25% of their practice in the area.

- **NSW:** Accredits specialists in the following areas of law: family, criminal, business, personal injury, taxation, employment and industrial, wills and estates, commercial litigation, immigration, property and mediation.
- **Victoria:** Accredits specialists in the following areas of law: family, business, commercial litigation, criminal, environmental, immigration, personal injury, property, wills and estates, and alternative dispute resolution.
- **WA:** At present there are only accredited specialists in family law.
- **Queensland** introduced specialist accreditation for family law this year.

TEST REPORT

First aid kits

*Eleven of the 28 kits would have been unsuitable to deal with **any** of five common emergency situations.*



AN EMERGENCY STRIKES. YOU rush to your first aid kit, only to find the basic sterile dressings you need for heavy bleeding haven't been included. Or there's not enough of them. Or they're of poor quality.

Of course, bleeding isn't the only potential emergency — it may be a broken limb or a snake bite you're faced with, and rather than dressings, it could be appropriate bandages that haven't been included. The point is, if you don't have a comprehensive kit it's not fully prepared for emergencies — which means chances are, neither are you.

EMERGENCIES KITS SHOULD COPE WITH

A good kit should be able to cope with the following five common emergencies:

- Major bleeding.
- Serious burns.
- Fractures.
- Foreign bodies.
- Insect bites, stings and snake bites.

Eleven of the 28 kits would have been unsuitable to deal with *any* of these five common emergency situations — which could spell disaster if you're faced with one of them.

Few of the kits under $40 are worth buying unless you only want to use them for minor cuts and grazes — and you may already have something for this at home. The only under-$40 kits that could cope with the five emergencies were the ST JOHN Personal/Home K0453, at $39.95, and the RED CROSS SA Basic RC2 kit, at $23.50.

FIRST AID NOT PROVIDED

A first aid kit should be able to provide — literally — the *first* aid in emergencies, until you reach trained medical help such as a hospital or a doctor.

In order to do this, we think kits need to at least meet the 'essential' requirements of the voluntary Australian standard for general-purpose kits, which we used as the basis of our ratings. However, while the standard is a good starting point, it came out in 1983 and needs updating. It's comprehensive with regard to major emergencies, but it doesn't mention basic infection control items such as gloves. So in judging whether or not kits were of an acceptable standard, we added disposable gloves as an essential basic item.

We found many kits in our test didn't come close to meeting the standard, which was why they couldn't cope with basic emergencies. Of all 28 kits we bought, only seven supplied all the essential items for general-purpose kits required by the standard. However, none met all the quality requirements so none achieved an overall score of 100%. For example, we found scissors or tweezers that developed surface rust in our tests, and bandages which weren't stretchy enough to meet the standard.

LABELLING FOR LIFE OR DEATH

CHOICE thinks companies shouldn't be allowed to call their kit a 'first aid' kit unless it's capable of providing this basic level of first aid. Some companies we bought kits from disagreed with this, saying their kits don't meet the standard because they were never intended to be

How we tested

We tested 28 widely available first aid kits, 23 of which cost $50 or less. The other five cost between $70 and $90, and we included them to see if paying more would buy you a better and more comprehensive kit. Generally speaking, the answer was yes.

All the kits were scored against the voluntary Australian Standard AS 2675 and then assessed for whether they would cope with five common emergencies. The standard covers three types of kit — Kit A, hikers' or personal kits; Kit B, general-purpose kits, and Kit C, household kits. We decided to test general-purpose kits, which can be used for a whole range of emergencies.

Lance Waddington, a nurse educator and first aid expert from Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney, assessed how well each kit would cope with five common emergencies.

more than a cut-and-graze kit for children.

Such kits should be labelled clearly to distinguish them from comprehensive kits — in an emergency the difference between them could be life and death.

THE EXTRAS

As well as requiring 'essential' items, the standard also lists optional ones. Only one kit supplied all the optional items listed in the standard as well as the basics — the **ST JOHN Family K0441** kit. The **RED CROSS NSW Family KF1F** kit supplied everything but a sting relief treatment (there's some debate whether kits should include any items such as sting relief which deteriorate over time and therefore should carry use-by dates — see page 37). Nevertheless, at $31 cheaper than the **ST JOHN Family K0441** kit, the **RED CROSS NSW Family KF1F** kit represents better value for money.

WHAT TO BUY

The best kits scored well for the essential items in the standard, provided disposable gloves for infection control and coped well with our five emergency situations. Three of them are considerably cheaper than the others, and are our **Best Buys** — but each is only available in one state. (Check the footnotes to the table on page 38 for availability details.)

ST JOHN Family K0441		$81.10
RED CROSS NSW Family KF1F		$49.95
RED CROSS SA Multi-purpose RC9	BEST BUY	$81.50
RED CROSS QUEENSLAND GP226		$45.00
RED CROSS VICTORIA GP/Boat 4494	BEST BUY	$45.00
RED CROSS NSW General purpose KC3	BEST BUY	$79.95
TRAFALGAR GPAS		$79.50

If you go on a day's outing, take your entire general-purpose kit with you — don't break it up by taking several items out because you'd be guessing what emergencies you'll encounter. Alternatively, specialist car first aid kits are available, which place more emphasis on larger dressings and bandages. They also include a safety triangle, used as a hazard warning for other motorists approaching.

Infection control

While trying to help someone in an emergency — even a friend or relative — you can run the risk of catching (or passing on) anything from a cold or flu to HIV. Infectious diseases are mainly spread through body fluids such as blood or saliva. Infection control is designed to prevent this.

Simple prevention

Disease can enter your body through things like cuts and grazes on your skin, or via any opening in your body, such as your nose or mouth. If your kit contains two simple items — a disposable pair of latex gloves and a resuscitation mask, you can put a barrier between yourself and the victim, to help prevent body fluids from being transferred.

You may not know how to use a resuscitation mask unless you've been trained in first aid, but gloves are a basic infection control measure.

However, you won't know how to use a mask unless you've done a first aid course and know how to resuscitate someone (see *Learning first aid*, page 39). Some experts advise against first-aiders using a mask unless they have been specifically trained in its use.

Nineteen of the kits we tested supplied gloves and two supplied resuscitation masks. We think all kits should at least supply latex gloves. The voluntary standard doesn't cover infection control — possibly because it was written in 1983, before infections like HIV and newer strains of hepatitis were known to be a significant threat, and awareness of the need for infection control was lower. It needs updating.

Infection control also needs to be covered in the first-aid information supplied with the kits. Almost all failed to strongly recommend wearing protective gloves (if available) before treating bleeding or any wound.

Reusable or disposable?

For the safety of the injured person, any dressings that come into contact with wounds or burns should be sterile. To protect others, these dressings must be properly disposed of after use (for example, put in a plastic bag in the garbage). This includes dressings, gauzes, wound closures and stick-on strips, all of which should have packaging clearly marked 'single-use only'.

Bandages for sprains or broken limbs without broken skin don't need to be sterile but must be clean. These items, such as triangular and stretch bandages, can be reused, but use your judgment. If blood or other contaminants are involved, dispose of them carefully. If there are no contaminants, washing may be enough.

Pointed forceps are a safer option for removing a splinter than splinter probes, which pose the risk of accidentally pricking your own skin after contact with the casualty's blood. Make sure you wash forceps thoroughly before using them again.

If you've had to throw away an item from your kit, always replace it immediately.

What should be in my kit?

A good first aid kit should be able to deal with a range of emergency situations. Here's what you need for a general-purpose kit:

ESSENTIAL ITEMS

1. At least nine sterile cotton gauze swabs
These come in packs of three or five, each 75 mm by 75 mm, total cost between $3.60 and $4.50.
■ Use these to clean wounds and to place over non-adhesive burn dressings.

2. At least three disposable hand towels or tissues
In a pocket-sized pack tissues cost 50 cents to $1, often in packs of 10.
■ For general cleaning other than wounds.

3. 24 sterile adhesive dressing strips
Individually wrapped, in assorted widths, cost $1.70 to $2.40 per pack.
■ These can cover small cuts, blisters and abrasions.

4. One roll of adhesive strapping
Minimum 25 mm wide and 2.5 m long, cost about $3.60.
■ To hold dressings in place.
■ Choose one that is low-allergenic.

5. Two sterile non-adhesive dry dressings
Individually packed, each 100 mm by 100 mm in size, total cost around $3.
■ To be used for burns, abrasions, cuts, lacerations and weeping wounds.

6. Three sterile wound dressings
Sterile cotton dressing pad with gauze bandage attached, one each of three sizes — 13 ($1.25 to $3.50), 14 ($1.65 to $5.50) and 15 ($2 to $5.50).
■ These can be used to help control bleeding by applying pressure, and to protect wounds. They can also be used as an eyepad.

7. Three rolls of stretch bandage
One each of three widths — 50 mm ($1.65 to $7.95), 75 mm ($2.80 to $9.60) and 100 mm ($3.60 to $11.25), all of which should be at least 1.5 m long, and able to stretch to around twice that length. There are different stretch bandage materials; the more common are 'crepe' or 'elastic conforming'.
■ To hold a dressing in position, to support injured limbs, and to give first aid for venomous bites.

8. Two triangular calico bandages
Each edge at least 900 mm long and without a selvedge. Total cost about $7.30.
■ To be used as a sling, as a bandage to hold large dressings or splints in position or as a dressing.

9. At least five safety pins
About 40 mm long, cost $1.20 to $3.15 for a pack.
■ To hold bandages in place.

10. One pair of scissors
Rust-resistant, with at least one blunt point, about 100 mm long, cost $3.60 to $9.95.
■ These are to cut dressings and bandages and to cut away clothing.

11. One pair of rust-resistant pointed forceps
With accurately aligned tips, in a protective case to protect the tips, cost $4 to $5.50.
■ For removing splinters and stings.

Putting your own kit together

It's not cheap putting together all the items for a kit — it can cost you anywhere between $50 and $130 for the essential items. So buying one of our Best Buy kits could represent better value than putting one together yourself (see *What to buy*, page 35).

However, compared with some other top-scoring kits costing $80 or more, it could be cheaper to put your own kit together — but you'd have to shop around for the cheapest prices. And many items in the kit aren't easy to find in a pharmacy (you may have to buy them direct from companies like St John Ambulance or Australian Red Cross).

12. One pencil and notepad
Cost around $1.
■ For recording times and details, and for passing messages.

13. At least three plastic bags
About 150 mm by 200 mm each, cost about 20 cents for three, although they usually come in packs of 20 or more. Ideally, they should be sealable.
■ For carrying water, making ice packs, disposing of dirty dressings or for carrying severed body parts.

14. Disposable latex gloves and an approved resuscitation mask
Gloves about $6 for a pack of 50; masks cost between $4 and $28.
■ For infection control.

15. First aid information
A good first aid book can be a useful reminder, but in an emergency you need to have done a course to be able to act quickly (see *Learning first aid*, page 39).
You can buy good first aid booklets from St John Ambulance or Australian Red Cross.

16. Container
You need a container to keep your kit together, clean and dry. A plastic lunchbox is sufficient as long as it's resealable and waterproof. Add $2.60 to $5 to the total price.

Approximate cost of essential items, excluding booklet:
$50 to $130
Aproximate cost of optional items:
$20 to $30
Approximate cost of whole kit, excluding booklet:
$70 to $160

OPTIONAL ITEMS

1. At least six isopropyl alcohol swabs
Individually foil-wrapped, each should be marked "to be discarded and replaced after use". Cost is about $3 for a pack of 100.
■ For cleaning areas around wounds.

2. One sterile 'combine' dressing
A thick absorbent dressing, 90 mm by 200 mm, cost around 50 cents.
■ To cover wounds.

3. One plastic squeeze bottle of saline solution
About 100 mL, clearly labelled, including the expiry date, purpose and instruction to discard and replace after use. May also come in other sizes. Saline should be thrown away after the bottle is opened and used for the first time. Cost about $2.15.
■ To clean eyes, wounds and burns (see *Use-by dates*, below, for more information).

4. One aluminium foil blanket
Disposable, 1.3 m by 2 m, cost $6 to $7.75.
■ To keep a casualty warm.

5. Sting-relief treatment
A minimum of 10 mL, clearly labelled, including purpose and expiry date. (It should be thrown away once it's past its use-by date.) Cost $6 to $9.55.
■ To relieve discomfort caused by stings or bites (see *Use-by dates*, below).

Use-by dates

Although the voluntary standard recommends including sting-relief treatment in first aid kits, there's a risk involved with having treatment items needing use-by dates.

Items such as sting-relief and antiseptic creams and painkillers (all of which are treatment items, not first aid items) have a limited shelf-life, and more often than not you'll have them at home already.

Kits that do include such items should have a use-by date on the outside of the kit, so you can readily see if the shelf-life of these items is about to expire, or has already done so.

For example, no consumer would have been happy with one of the kits we purchased for this report — it contained painkillers with a 1992 use-by date!

Tamper-proof

Kits should also be tamper-proof when they're sold, so people can't remove or swap items supplied in the kit. The **AMADA P1** kit we bought from a pharmacy included a bandage with the pharmacy price tag on it, which had obviously been included after removing the original bandage, for whatever reason. The kits should come in sealed plastic (Amada says its kits do so) with the contents list attached, ensuring you receive the complete kit with its original contents. Even a tamper-evident sticker on the rim of the kit case would indicate whether or not it had been opened.

First aid kits

	Brand / model	Manufacturer / distributor	Price paid ($)*	Dimensions (L x W x D, mm)	Optional item 1 Container	2 Saline solution	2 Sting treatment	2 Blanket
	SUITABLE FOR ALL FIVE EMERGENCY SITUATIONS							
	ST JOHN Family K0441	St John Ambulance	81.10	340 x 170 x 125	✓	✓	✓	✓
equal	**RED CROSS NSW** Family KF1F *(A)*	Australian Red Cross, NSW	49.95	250 x 180 x 90	✓	♦		✓
	RED CROSS SA RC 9 *(B)*	Australian Red Cross, SA	81.50	365 x 160 x 130	✓			
	RED CROSS Queensland GP226 *(C)*	Australian Red Cross, Qld	45.00	195 x 140 x 95	✓			
	RED CROSS Victoria GP/Boat 4494 *(D)*	Australian Red Cross, Vic	45.00	250 x 175 x 85	✓			✓
	RED CROSS NSW KC3 *(A) (E)*	Australian Red Cross, NSW	79.95	330 x 160 x 145	✓	✓		✓
	TRAFALGAR GPAS	Trafalgar Trading Company	79.50	225 x 120 x 120	✓	♦	✓	✓
	ST JOHN Personal / Home K0453	St John Ambulance	39.95	250 x 165 x 65	✓			
	ACCIDENTAL PKP 18300	Accidental First Aid Supplies	89.00	400 x 180 x 140	✓	♦		✓
	RED CROSS SA Basic RC2	Australian Red Cross, SA	23.50	200 x 140 x 70	✓			
	NOT SUITABLE FOR ONE OR MORE EMERGENCY SITUATIONS							
	AMADA P1	Amada	29.95	295 x 195 x 50	♦	♦		
	AMCAL	Amcal Chemists	39.95	250 x 160 x 50	✓	♦		✓
	TRAFALGAR AKL/2 *(F)*	Trafalgar Trading Company	36.95	280 x 140 x 45	✓	♦		
	ACCIDENTAL 18200 PC	Accidental First Aid Supplies	45.00	255 x 165 x 55	✓	♦		✓ *(J)*
	ALLIED VG1	Allied First Aid Supplies/Lumon	24.95	250 x 160 x 55	♦	♦		
	ELASTOPLAST 128001	Smith & Nephew	12.95	190 x 115 x 55	✓			
	ST JOHN Standard	St John Ambulance	19.50	215 x 115 x 40	✓			
	BRENNISTON Q7M	Brenniston Aust	22.90	195 x 135 x 65	✓	♦		
	TRAFALGAR AKM 2 *(F)*	Trafalgar Trading Company	20.00	185 x 120 x 45	✓	♦		
	TRENT Household	Aussie Imports	39.95	215 x 80 x 110	✓		✓	
	TRAFALGAR AKM *(F)*	Trafalgar Trading Company	31.50	185 x 120 x 45	✓		✓	
	COGHLAN'S Pack III	Grant Minervini Agencies	19.50	195 x 120 x 30	♦			
	OMBO Household kit *(G)*	The Ombo Company	39.00	210 x 80 x 115	✓			
	TRAFALGAR GKS *(F)*	Trafalgar Trading Company	49.95	135 x 180 x 50	✓		✓	
	BRENNISTON Q23B	Brenniston Aust	9.95	160 x 130 x 40	♦	♦		
	ALLIED VG2	Allied First Aid Supplies/Lumon	17.95	163 x 110 x 55	♦			
	BRI-LAW 0ACFA2W	Carcraft Australia	8.95	185 x 110 x 55	✓			
	AMADA GBZ	Amada	34.50 *(H)*	185 x 115 x 45	✓		✓	

✓ Present and complies with the standard, except in the case of containers, where it denotes we judged them suitable.

♦ Present but doesn't meet the standard, except in the case of containers, where it denotes we judged them less suitable (see note 1, below).

* Price paid in December 1995 / January 1996.

(A) Available only in NSW.
(B) Available only in SA, WA and the Northern Territory.
(C) Available only in Queensland.
(D) Available only in Victoria.
(E) Extra bandages now supplied with this kit.
(F) This product was discontinued in 1994. However, we still found it in shops.
(G) This kit has been updated, but may still be found in shops.
(H) We paid $34.50, but the manufacturer says $22.95 is the recommended price.
(J) This kit includes a foil blanket. However, it was missing from the one we bought.

1 Container

We asssessed all the containers to see how appropriate they were for the job. A ♦ means the kit had a container which was not sturdy or didn't close securely, or where items were fiddly to access.

2 Optional items

While the items in these columns are not essential, those kits that include them are more comprehensive and better value.

3 Infection control

The minimum a kit should include for infection control is latex gloves.

4 Essential items

Items in these columns are all considered essential. We've noted whether the first aid kit contained scissors, forceps, pencil and notepad, and plastic bags, and whether they were as specified in the voluntary standard.

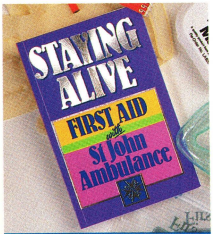
We then gave scores for items grouped as clean-up, dressings and bandages, and the scores for each category were converted into percentages.

5 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of the three percentage scores plus scores for scissors, forceps, pencil and notepad, and plastic bags. The kit also had to have gloves to be recommended

A kit could therefore receive 100% for each of the three percentage scores but get a lower overall score if it lost points in other areas, such as the forceps being out of alignment.

Infection control		Essential items									
3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5		
Gloves	Resuscitation mask	Scissors	Forceps	Pencil and notepad	Plastic bags	Clean-up score (%)	Dressings score (%)	Bandages score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model	
✓		✓	♦	✓	✓	100	100	100	95	**ST JOHN** Family K0441	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	100	93	95	**RED CROSS NSW** Family KF1F *(A)*	equal
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	100	93	95	**RED CROSS SA** RC 9 *(B)*	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	100	87	92	**RED CROSS Queensland** GP226 *(C)*	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	100	80	91	**RED CROSS Victoria** GP/Boat 4494 *(D)*	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	100	67	87	**RED CROSS NSW** KC3 *(A) (E)*	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	94	60	82	**TRAFALGAR** GPAS	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	67	73	78	**ST JOHN** Personal / Home K0453	
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100	67	67	75	**ACCIDENTAL** PKP 18300	
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	100	67	60	73	**RED CROSS SA** Basic RC2	
✓	✓	♦	✓			33	50	53	45	**AMADA** P1	
✓		♦	✓		✓	0	50	40	39	**AMCAL**	
✓		✓	✓			67	28	27	35	**TRAFALGAR** AKL/2 *(F)*	
✓		♦	✓		✓	0	50	13	34	**ACCIDENTAL** 18200 PC	
✓		✓	✓			67	22	33	34	**ALLIED** VG1	
		♦	✓			0	33	53	32	**ELASTOPLAST** 128001	
✓		♦	♦		✓	0	39	33	29	**ST JOHN** Standard	
✓		♦	♦			33	39	27	27	**BRENNISTON** Q7M	
✓		♦	✓			33	28	27	25	**TRAFALGAR** AKM 2 *(F)*	
		♦	✓			0	39	13	23	**TRENT** Household	
		♦	♦			17	22	27	21	**TRAFALGAR** AKM *(F)*	
		♦				50	28	0	16	**COGHLAN'S** Pack III	
		♦				0	44	0	16	**OMBO** Household kit *(G)*	
		♦	♦			0	11	27	15	**TRAFALGAR** GKS *(F)*	
			✓			0	22	0	14	**BRENNISTON** Q23B	
✓		♦	✓			0	11	7	11	**ALLIED** VG2	
		♦	♦			17	11	7	11	**BRI-LAW** 0ACFA2W	
		♦	✓			33	6	0	10	**AMADA** GBZ	



A book is a help and a reminder, but it's no substitute for taking a first aid course.

Learning first aid

Knowing how to use your kit is as important as having one. No matter how good your kit is, it will be of little use if you don't know what to do with its contents. The best way to learn first aid is to do a course. In an emergency you probably won't have time to properly read the instructions that come with a kit.

First aid courses are available in every state. Contact an organisation such as your local Australian Red Cross or St John Ambulance office. If they don't run courses, they should be able to tell you who does.

On average, a comprehensive course that teaches you how to deal with most emergencies should take a total of 18 to 24 hours, and cost between $100 and $150, depending on which state you live in and what materials are included. These courses can be done over two weekends or four consecutive weekdays, Saturdays or Sundays, or eight evenings.

On average, the certificate you receive on completion is valid for three years, but it's recommended you do a three or four-hour update on resuscitation methods every 12 months.

Shorter courses teaching the fundamentals of life-saving techniques (such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation) are available, but these will not help you if someone has an eye injury, for example. These courses take between four and eight hours to complete and cost on average between $35 and $55.

Highlights and achievements

Consuming Interest, our policy and campaigning magazine, consistently promotes and fights for consumer rights such as product safety, good labelling, a healthy environment, and universal telephone and banking access. The support of subscribers helps us to keep working on behalf of all Australian consumers.

There has been real progress on some issues in the past couple of months:

■ Over the past year *CI* readers have been at the forefront of the genetic engineering debate. Through research articles, lobbying activities and on-the-ground action to raise awareness, we have helped to kick off what has become a raging debate on technology and food.

What we demand for consumers are proper controls on safety, and labelling so people know what they're buying — our position is clear. Senator Bob Woods, the Parliamentary Secretary responsible for the National Food Authority, heard our call in the May CHOICE article, and announced an expert round table to openly discuss the matter. We will be there to represent consumer interests, and will report back to you in *CI*.

■ Elsewhere in the food safety and quality area, we were happy to note that our *CI* article on food trade laws with New Zealand, and the implications these might have on quality and nutrition levels in areas such as dairy products, was quoted in the National Food Authority's final report on the matter. We will continue to push for trade regulations based on the highest standards, not the lowest common denominator.

The following are some highlights from the current issue of CI.

LOBBY, LOBBY, LOBBY

Pounding the pavements of Australia's Parliament House — it's an important element of most successful consumer campaigns. Over recent months Consumers' Association policy staff have talked to our new Commonwealth Small Business and Consumer Affairs Minister, Geoff Prosser, as well as to Commonwealth health minister Dr Michael Wooldridge, communications minister Richard Alston and a number of influential staff at Treasury.

Usually changes which affect consumers pass through the corridors of political power before they end up on the shelves of our supermarkets, in our bank branches or down our telephone wires. Join us in the Winter issue of *CI* for a snapshot of one recent and controversial run-in with the Treasurer's most senior advisers.

THE WALLIS INQUIRY — WHOSE FINANCIAL FUTURE?

Fifteen years ago the Campbell Inquiry unleashed the full force of financial deregulation onto an unsuspecting community. For most consumers, the financial system has been a rollercoaster ride ever since.

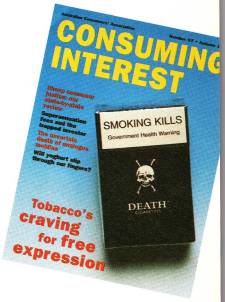
At times the new Wallis mega-inquiry seems to reflect the wildest dreams of leading bankers — talk of a cashless society, the death of banks, insurance via the Internet and on-line services from as far afield as Bermuda.

Technology is driving change in financial services, but just how much regulatory change (including relaxation of merger laws) is justified is yet to be tested in the inquiry. In *CI* we present the consumer viewpoint in the debate. You can also join us as we surf the Net to cut through some of the hype.

PRODUCT SAFETY LAWS

Standing between consumers and a world of unsafe products is a layer of government agencies and a bunch of tough-talking laws. Largely the system works, but it can also fail us.

A review of product safety regulators resulted in a damning report last year, which prompted us to take a closer look. Join our leading legal journalist in his report on the product safety problems that still haunt some of the household brands we know and trust.



Consuming Interest — promoting your consumer rights.

CUTS TO THE HEALTH SYSTEM

When the government went looking for $600 million to slice from our health care budget, everyone knew the results would be tough on consumers. But now, on the eve of of the budget, we investigate how consumer-unfriendly the probable cutting options are likely to be and examine the possible impacts on patients, quality of service and bulk-billing.

Universal consumer access to the health care system *must* be preserved, but just how this can be managed is a different story.

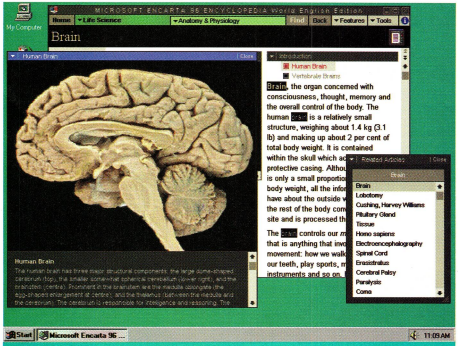
For a hard-hitting look at your consumer rights and how they are threatened, there's no better read than *Consuming Interest*. ❑

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

Consuming Interest is a quarterly magazine available by subscription. If you'd like to subscribe, phone (02) 9577 3355, or use the subscription form on page 26.

Encyclopaedias on CD

These days, looking up an encyclopaedia can (sometimes) be a carnival for the senses.



A typical entry in the Encarta 96 encyclopaedia (see *How big are their brains?* on page 42).

HAVING AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA available on computer, where words and pictures can be joined by sound and video clips, has some big attractions:

- **Easy access:** All the electronic encyclopaedias we saw have features designed to help you find your way around. The easiest method is to type in the topic and the information will pop up in front of you.
- **Space saving:** A box with a disk takes up a lot less room than a 22-volume encyclopaedia.
- **Cost:** It can also cost a lot less. You could pay $1000 to $2000 for a set of books, compared with around $80 to $150 for any of our recommended CD-ROM versions.
- **Fun while you go:** They're a stimulating and enjoyable way to explore an encyclopaedia; there's much more interaction than you could expect from a book.
- **Lots of information:** CD-ROMs can carry a vast amount of information, and these do. Most are updated on an annual basis.

However, along with their attractions, there are also disappointments:

- **More tell than show:** It should be possible to experience the material — find out what Elvis Presley music sounds like, for example, or see what happens when a bird moves its wing. But this multimedia capacity is not as well developed as it may be in the future. Most video clips use a very small frame size, some are rather jerky, and the quality is not nearly as good as television.

Nor is there much of it. Video is used only occasionally, mainly because it takes a lot of computer power to run moving pictures and sound, and it takes a lot of space on the CD-ROM. And even with what there is, if your computer isn't powerful enough, you could find the video very slow.

On the other hand, most of the encyclopaedias do have good illustrations.

- **Americanisms:** Most of the available encyclopaedias are American, with American spelling and accents for narrated text, and an emphasis on American history and society. ENCARTA 96, presented in 'World English', which is really UK English, is a notable exception (but the Mac version of Encarta 96 isn't in World English). AUSTRALIAN INFOPEDIA gives the Australian content in an Australian accent and the rest with an American accent.
- **Coverage:** Each encyclopaedia has a different emphasis on information, and none seems consistent in its depth of coverage from one topic to the next.

Before you buy, it pays to have a good look at what's inside the encyclopaedia.

PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Our testing revealed that some of the manufacturer's recommendations for the minimum computer system needed to run the encyclopaedias were inadequate. Using the minimum systems they recommended, system error messages sometimes appeared, or the encyclopaedias were painfully slow.

The critical factor seems to be the amount of RAM in your computer. In our experience, you need at least 8 Mb to run multimedia programs successfully, though 12 Mb or even 16 Mb is preferable. Some of the packaging for the encyclopaedias claimed 4 Mb as an adequate minimum; we disagree.

If the software you buy is claimed to be suitable for your system, but then will only run properly if you upgrade or reconfigure, we consider you should be entitled to a refund — just as you would be if you bought any product which did not perform to a standard you're reasonably entitled to expect.

GETTING YOUR MONEY BACK

We asked some retailers whether they would give refunds to customers who were disappointed with the performance of software on their systems.

Harvey Norman said the shop would normally side with the customer, especially where it seemed the supplier had misrepresented the software. In other cases, it would refer the matter back to the suppliers.

"We have technical support in our store, so if a customer brings their computer and software to our store, we can advise them on what to do."

Dick Smith Electronics says its staff are encouraged to explain minimum

specifications to customers before they purchase software. But if there is a problem with software performance, the decision as to whether to provide a refund is left to the store manager: "The store manager decides whether there has been a change of mind, or whether the software genuinely does not live up to the customer's expectations."

OUR ADVICE

Before buying software:

- Ask the retailer whether it will run comfortably on your system. This way you don't have to rely solely on the packaging, which may not be entirely realistic.
- Check with the retailer that you can return the product if it doesn't work properly on your computer.
- Insist on a demonstration. You wouldn't buy a print encyclopaedia without at least browsing through it first, and nor should you with an electronic version.

WHAT TO BUY

Best overall

ENCARTA 96	$79
COMPTON'S	$130

For good-quality information, regardless of the multimedia bells and whistles, consider:

GROLIER 1995 *(A)*	$129
WORLD BOOK *(A)*	$139
INFOPEDIA	$129
AUSTRALIAN INFOPEDIA *(A)*	$139

Young children

EXPLORAPEDIA World of Nature and World of People	each $59

(A) An updated edition is likely to be available by the time you read this.

What you need to use these encyclopaedias

CD-ROM encyclopaedias vary in their different minimum system recommendations, but in our experience these are the basic requirements and our preferred system recommendations.

FOR PCs (IBM-COMPATIBLE COMPUTERS)

Minimum requirements

- A monitor that can handle 256 colours (VGA or SVGA).
- Windows 3.1 or Windows 95.
- A Windows-compatible sound and video card.
- 8 Mb of RAM.
- A 486 processor.
- A double-speed CD-ROM drive.
- Between 3 and 5 Mb of space on the hard disk.

CHOICE preferred system — PC

- For better performance on a PC we recommend a Pentium processor with 16 Mb of RAM and a quad-speed or better CD-ROM drive.

FOR MACINTOSH USERS

- 68040 processor.
- 8 Mb of RAM.
- 3 to 6 Mb of free hard-disk space.
- Double-speed CD-ROM drive.
- System 7 or higher.

CHOICE preferred system — Mac

- For better performance, we recommend a PowerPC processor with 16 Mb of RAM and a quad-speed or better CD-ROM drive.

Techno talk

CD-ROM: Stands for Compact Disk — Read Only Memory. These CDs are much like the music variety, and can store vast amounts of data — around 650 Mb, which is 450 times the amount of the typical computer floppy disk. You need a CD-ROM drive attached to your computer to use a CD-ROM.

Hypertext: A cross-referencing system where clicking on coloured words in the text takes you to a new entry.

Icon: A graphic image on the computer's screen, which you select (using a mouse) to carry out a specific task, such as to access a file on a disk.

Mb (Megabyte): A unit of measurement for computer memory capacity.

Menu: A list of options or commands displayed on the screen. You choose the option you want by selecting it using a mouse.

Mouse: A handheld device that you move to control a pointer on the computer screen. You click the mouse to select icons and menus on the screen.

Multimedia: The combination of text, video, sound, illustrations and animation available with a multimedia computer.

RAM: Random access memory, which is the computer's short-term or operating memory.

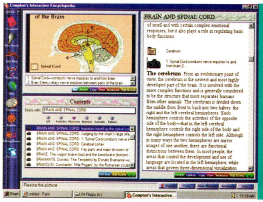
How big are their brains?

What do you find when you select a topic? We chose 'brain' as an example. Both **ENCARTA 96** and **COMPTON'S** (see screen images right and on page 41) have comprehensive entries, with around 3300 words in a series of articles. **ENCARTA 96** has six pictures, including a good photo of the whole brain with a detailed caption. **COMPTON'S** has one particularly good animation (showing how reflex action works) and five pictures.

The screens themselves are similar in design. At the lower left, both have a list of all the 'brain' entries in the encyclopaedia. **ENCARTA 96** also has a window referring to related articles — a list of other entries that may also be of interest (for example, lobotomy and pituitary gland).

There's a 'visuals' box at the upper left of both screens, which lets you access pictures, movies and animations. Click on this, and the window will increase in size to show the visuals, with text to explain what they mean. Both encyclopaedias have buttons to let you replay and stop the animation.

Both encyclopaedias have a text box running down the right, in which you find the articles themselves. The text also contains reference to other material (such as pictures). Click on the icons for these, and the new material will come up straightaway.



What you see when you look up 'The Brain' in Compton's.

Within the text some words are coloured. This is called hypertext. It's a cross-reference system which allows you to go straight to an entry on that topic just by clicking on it.

ENCARTA 96 (World English Edition)

Price: $79

ENCARTA 96 has a range of browsing and 'edutainment' features that families with late primary or high-school children will probably find appealing. It's a great encyclopaedia for browsing if you enjoy discovering interesting things.

COMPTON'S

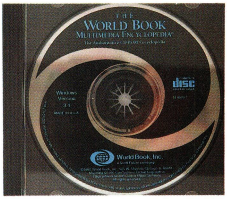
Price: $130

COMPTON'S search capabilities are not as effective as some of the other encyclopaedias in our test. However, a wide range of features combined with a very full and readable text makes **COMPTON'S** a good choice for secondary school students.

GROLIER 1995

Price: $129

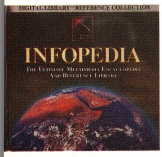
GROLIER has very good research features, with good search narrowing and cross-references. Although it lacks some basic features, such as a dictionary for difficult words, it's a reasonable all-rounder.

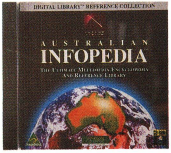


WORLD BOOK

Price: $139

WORLD BOOK is the easiest to read of all the encyclopaedias we tested, but has few 'edutainment' features. Without these distractions it is a good encyclopaedia for classroom research and for children doing homework, especially as it had the best score for text information.

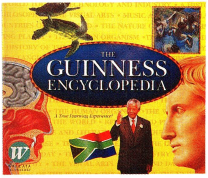




INFOPEDIA and AUSTRALIAN INFOPEDIA

Price: $129 Infopedia; $139 Australian Infopedia

The two **INFOPEDIA** editions have text suitable for university-level students. Some Australian users might prefer the **AUSTRALIAN INFOPEDIA**, which has extra information about Australia and includes an Australian-sourced dictionary, thesaurus and book of quotations.



THE GUINNESS

Price: $89

THE GUINNESS was the poorest CD-ROM encyclopaedia we tested, with badly designed screen layout, poor navigation controls and slow and cumbersome search functions.

CD-ROM encyclopaedias

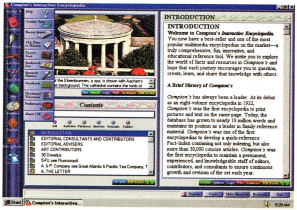
1

2

Title	Distributor/ supplier	Origin	Target price ($) *	Main text origin	Date of publication	Dictionary
ENCARTA 96 (World English Edition)	Microsoft	USA	79	Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia	1996	✓
COMPTON'S	Dataflow	USA	130	Webster's New World publications	1996	✓
equal **GROLIER** 1995 *(A)*	Light Years Ahead	USA	129	The Academic American Encyclopedia 1995	1995	
WORLD BOOK *(A)*	Learning Journey	USA	139	World Book Encyclopedia	1995	✓
INFOPEDIA	Roadshow	USA	129	Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia and others	1995	✓
AUSTRALIAN INFOPEDIA *(A)*	Roadshow	Aust / USA	139	Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia and others	1995	✓
THE GUINNESS	Light Years Ahead	USA / UK	89	The Guinness Encyclopedia	1995	

* Prices shown are as quoted by distributors/suppliers in May 1996.

(A) An updated edition, with updated information and some new features, should be available by the time you read this.



How they work

Pictured above are the home screens of two of our recommended titles. Home screens are the entry point into the encyclopaedia: it's where you start to get into the contents. **ENCARTA 96** is presented in the simple style of a book's contents page. To find out what's inside, you click on the icon of your choice on the right.

The **COMPTON'S** home screen looks more complex, but is set out in the same format as all of its other screens. Once you know how it works it's efficient to use. To find out about the **COMPTON'S** contents, you click on the icons running down the extreme left.

Apart from word searches, there are many other ways of getting at the material. There are functions that take you on guided tours or let you browse.

COMPTON'S provides a full alphabetical index, a very thorough topic tree (listing topics and sub-topics), and a 'brainstorming' tool called Info Pilot, which displays a topic centrally with related topics in a circle around it. Its Explore function provides different environments to explore, including one especially for children.

Both encyclopaedias have a time line running from prehistory to the modern day, covering a large range of events in the natural world and human history. Click on the event you're interested in, and the entry opens up. Maps and geographical information are similarly presented.

Both also allow access to monthly world news summaries via the Internet — providing you have your own Internet connection, which you have to pay for.

ENCARTA 96 has an interactive section called Experiment. For example, you can change the moon's orbit and see what happens. It also has a quiz game called MindMaze, which lets you choose from four levels of skill and a range of subject areas — it's a fun way to learn about different topics.

COMPTON'S doesn't have a game, but it does have an Editing Room: a place where you can put together separate pieces of the encyclopaedia in your own multimedia presentation. You can add your own titles and narration, which you type in or record with a microphone.

ENCARTA allows you to make a slide show. This lets you 'exhibit' pictures, video, text and sounds in the order of your choosing, for presentation purposes.

COMPTON'S home screen also has a menu which provides access to a wide range of features, including a guided tour, a bookmark list (which shows articles you have marked), a dictionary and thesaurus, references and a list of **COMPTON'S** own sources. **ENCARTA 96** also has most of these features.

Just Australia

When we were buying CD-ROM encyclopaedias for our test we came across **WEBSTER'S Encyclopedia of Australia 1996.**

WEBSTER'S focuses on Australia and covers areas such as its history, famous places, arts and culture, natural wonders, and sports and people.

We didn't include it in our test, since the other CD-ROM encyclopaedias are general reference works, and **WEBSTER'S** isn't. If you're after something with mainly Australian content, **WEBSTER'S** is worth considering. It's also worth considering as an add-on to other encyclopaedias with little Australian content — but don't buy it if you want a general reference encyclopaedia.

3 PC / Mac version	4 Updates	5 Ease of use score (%)	6 Text information score (%)	7 Multi-media quality score (%)	8 Overall score (%)	Title
✓/✓	18 months	87	84	83	85	**ENCARTA 96** (World English Edition)
✓/	annual	86	83	62	77	**COMPTON'S**
✓/✓	annual	73	83	57	71	**GROLIER** 1995 *(A)*
✓/✓	annual	69	91	53	71	**WORLD BOOK** *(A)*
✓/✓	annual	69	87	49	68	**INFOPEDIA**
✓/	annual	69	87	44	67	**AUSTRALIAN INFOPEDIA** *(A)*
✓/✓	annual	45	55	43	48	**THE GUINNESS**

equal

1 Main text origin
This is the main printed reference material on which the CD-ROM is based.

2 Dictionary/atlas/games
These features are incorporated into some of the encyclopaedias we tested.

3 PC / Mac version
We tested the PC version of the encyclopaedias. This column tells you which are also available for Macintosh computers. All the PC versions we tested will run on Windows 95 and Windows 3.1.

4 Updates
New editions of these CD-ROM encyclopaedias are released at various intervals. Upgrades for current editions are sometimes available on CD-ROM or via the Internet.

RATINGS
An educational software expert evaluated the encyclopaedias. He looked at how good the text information and multimedia features were and how easy the encyclopaedias were to use. A panel of students and teachers also looked at each encyclopaedia, and gave their opinions about which ones were best.

5 Ease of use score
We considered ease of installation, help with learning, screen design, search methods, navigational features, retrieval features and ease of copying, pasting and printing.

6 Text Information score
Each assessment considered the amount of text, its accuracy and comprehensibility, the number of articles and the amount of Australian content.

7 Multimedia quality score
Our assessment included the quality and number of photographs, diagrams, animations, video clips and sounds.

8 Overall score
The overall score is a combination of the ease of use, text information and multimedia quality scores. All scores were weighted equally, as we believe a multi-media encyclopaedia should incorporate easy-to-use multi-media features that are as good as its content.

Fun with a frog: our pick for kids

The **EXPLORAPEDIA** was the only young children's encyclopaedia in our test, so we didn't include it in our table. While other encyclopaedias would be suitable for late primary and high school children as well as adults, the **EXPLORAPEDIA** would be good for even younger children. It was well rated by both the experts and all the children who took part in our assessments.

It comes in two volumes, the World of People and the World of Nature. They are similar in presentation except that the People volume has American narrators, while Nature has British.

The home screen is set up as the command centre of a spaceship, with an animated Earth visible through the big window. From this cockpit you can access all the encyclopaedia entries as well as some weird and wonderful effects. The pilot is a space-suited frog called Tad. He's somewhere on every screen, so if you get into trouble you can just click on him and he'll help you get sorted out.

If you click on various parts of the world, you'll open a different basic scene (a 'health centre', for example, from which you can learn about the human body). Click on parts of the spaceship and other features come up, such as a radio that plays songs and a screen that plays videos.

There's a quiz game and a function that suggests projects for children to do using the encyclopaedia. Other elements take you to word processing and graphics programs.

The topic entries typically contain small amounts of text with lots of pictures, animations and videos. The text is narrated by children in language that is easy to understand.

RECALLS AND BANS

THE PRODUCTS: **Peanut butter** manufactured by **General Foods** with use-by dates before March 18, 1997, and sold under the brand names of:

■ **Daffodil**, **ETA**, **Farmland**, **IGA**, **Kraft**, **PDF**, **Savings** — nationally.

■ **Homebrand** in Victoria, SA and WA.

■ **No Frills** in Victoria, Queensland and SA.

■ **Bi-Lo** in Victoria, NSW, Queensland and SA.

■ **Bulk 2 kg Foodservice ETA crunchy.**

Also recalled are **Kraft Digits (peanut butter and peanut chocolate)** with use-by dates before December 18, 1997, **Kraft Satay Sauce** with use-by dates before April 16, 1997, and **Uncle Toby's Peanut Butter Muesli Bars** with best-before dates of 24.11.1996, 3.12.1996, 7.1.1997, 12.1.1997, 13.1.1997.

The problem: Three batches of peanut butter have been linked to reported cases of gastroenteritis, caused by salmonella, resulting in nausea and diarrhoea. Similar ingredients may have been used in the peanut products also recalled.

What to do: Return the product to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information, contact General Foods Consumer Relations Department on 1800 034 241 or, for Uncle Toby's products, Uncle Toby's Customer Relations Department on 1800 025 768.

THE PRODUCT: **Woolworths Supermarkets, Food for Less** and **Fleming's Food s stores, Mac's Liquor Stores** and **Town Hall Variety Store** have recalled **Home Brand Salted Mixed Nuts, 375 g**, use-by date May 14, 1997. These are sold throughout NSW and the ACT in the above-mentioned stores.

The problem: A packet was found to contain metal fragments which, if consumed, could cause injury.

What to do: Return the product to the nearest store for a refund. For further information, contact the Product Recall Co-ordinator on 0418 640 815.

THE PRODUCT: **Streets** has withdrawn **Blue Ribbon vanilla ice cream two-litre tub** from all states except SA and Tasmania, with use-by dates 3/5/97 and 4/5/97.

The problem: Mercury particles were found in a two-litre container of ice cream.

What to do: If you have the above product with the above expiry dates, contact Streets Customer Service on 1800 643 336.

THE PRODUCT: **Coles Supermarkets** in Queensland and northern NSW (Ballina, Inverell and Murwillumbah) have recalled **Farmland Chopped Parsley, 50 g**, all use-by dates.

The problem: The product may contain listeria (it hasn't been confirmed yet whether it's *Listeria monocytogenes*, which can affect pregnant women).

What to do: Don't eat the product. Return it to your local store for a refund.

THE PRODUCT: **Toyota** has recalled a range of **LandCruiser 80 series** towbars (sold from September 1991 to the end of February 1996) and **RAV 4** towbars (sold from July 1994 to the end of February 1996). Only towbars supplied through Toyota dealers as a genuine Toyota accessory are affected. The towbars can be identified by a number stamped onto the towbar identification plate as follows: LandCruiser — 08644-60022C (attached to towbar rear face); RAV 4 — 08644-42010C (attached to towbar left-side arm). The following vehicles may be affected:

■ Landcruisers: 11FJ80, Frame number 08501402 to 08501819; 11FJ81, Frame number 08002326 to 08002877; 11PJ80 Frame number 08006566 to 08024888; 11TJ80, Frame number 08003889 to 081011306; 11TJ82, Frame number 08100001 to 08101020; 11UJ80, Frame number 08000001 to 08023988.

■ RAV 4: 71SC10, Frame number 00001022 to 00124119; 72SC11, 00001021 to 00086937.

Some earlier-production LandCruiser vehicles not fitted with a towbar may have later been fitted with one from within the above towbar production period. LandCruiser 80 series towbars manufactured from 1990 to February 1992, part numbers 08644-60020C and 08644-60021C, were subject to an earlier recall and are not involved in this recall.

The problem: Under a combination of factors including load/load distribution conditions, vehicle driving patterns and road conditions, the towbar hitch pin securing clip may dislodge, allowing the hitch pin to displace, leaving only the safety chains to restrain the trailer and load. A new hitch pin has been developed to prevent this from happening.

What to do: If you have one of the above towbars, contact your Toyota dealer immediately to have the towbar inspected and the new hitch pin installed. Do not tow until the new hitch pin is installed. For further information, contact any Toyota dealer, or the Toyota Customer Assistance Centre on 1800 800 394.

THE PRODUCTS: **Woolworths Supermarkets, Variety** and **Crazy Prices** stores, **Safeway, Roelf Vos** and **Purity** supermarkets, **Flemings** and **Food for Less** stores have recalled the following children's nightwear:

■ **Girl's nightshirt, Bedbugs brand**, made in India, sizes 8 to 14, white with three sailor bears, striped pattern and an anchor motif. Ref. no: 61462, barcode 9300633 142175.

■ **Girl's nightshirt, Bedbugs brand**, made in India, sizes 8 to 14, white and black spot print with a small dog print on the chest and a striped neckband and sleeves. Ref. no: 61470, barcode 9300633 142605.

■ **Girl's nightshirt, Bedbugs brand**, made in India, sizes 8 to 14, all white with assorted Christmas prints, Ref. no: 61100, barcode 9311679 887780.

The problem: Due to fabric weight these garments don't comply with the mandatory standard and pose a very high fire risk. Also, the fire danger warning label is not clearly visible. Stop using these products immediately as they may be highly flammable.

■ **Boy's sleepwear boxer shorts, Grandway brand**, made in China, sizes 8 to 14, assorted check patterns, Ref. no: 61315, barcode 9300633 142209.

The problem: There is no fire danger warning label as required by the mandatory standard.

■ **Unisex pyjamas, Little By Little brand**, made in China, sizes 0 to 2, knit garment with assorted prints and colours with contrasting basque around the neck and legs, and two buttons on the shoulder. Ref. no: 62609, barcode 9300633 144623.

■ **Children's pyjamas**, made in China, sizes 0 to 2, jade, blue or red colours with a bear print on the chest and two buttons on the shoulder. Ref. no: 42150, barcode 9300633 459192.

The problem: The size of the lettering on the fire danger warning label is smaller than that specified in the mandatory standard.

■ **Girl's nightshirt, Bedbugs brand**, made in China, sizes 8 to 14, assorted animal prints on a white background with three buttons at the neckline. Ref. no: 61010, barcode 9300633 141844.

■ **Girl's nightshirt, Bedbugs brand**, made in China, sizes 2 to 6, overall print design, contrast collar with a knit band on the hem. Ref. no: 60964, barcode 9300633 141837.

■ **Girl's pyjamas, Bedbugs brand**, made in China, sizes 2 to 6, overall print designs. Ref. no: 60959, barcode 9300633 141813.

The problem: The fire danger warning label is smaller than that specified in the mandatory standard.

■ **Girl's pyjamas, Bedbugs brand**, made in India, sizes 8 to 12, white with a dog print on the chest and bone-print pants. Ref. no: 61467, barcode 9300633 142582.

The problem: The fire danger warning label is not clearly visible, as it should be according to the mandatory standard.

What to do: Stop using the products immediately and return them to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information, contact the Product Recall Co-ordinator on (02) 9847 1180.

THE PRODUCTS: **Big W** has recalled the following products:

■ **Baby pyjamas, Paddington Bear brand,** size 0 only, red body fabric with red/white-striped-sleeves and navy body fabric with navy/white-striped sleeves. A white chest panel shows Paddington on a bike. Keycode no: 196 2611, barcode 9314223 291949.

The problem: The garment exceeds allowable dimensions according to the mandatory standard. There is a high fire risk associated with this product and it must be kept away from fire.

■ **Baby nightgown, Piper brand**, size 0 only, white body fabric with either a red or blue bear print or a smocking design. Keycode no: 116 6545, barcode 9314223 036465.

The problem: Due to the fabric weight and design, this garment does not comply with the mandatory standard and poses a very high fire risk.

What to do: Stop using the products immediately and return them to the place of purchase for a refund. For further information, contact the Product Recall Co-ordinator on (02) 9847 1180.

THE PRODUCT: Answer Products has recalled **Manitou Mach 5 Bicycle Suspension Forks**.

The problem: The bicycle fork casting may fail, which may cause the front wheel to separate from the bicycle and result in loss of control.

What to do: If you have a Mach 5 fork, stop using it immediately until it has been inspected and appropriate action (see below) taken. Return the fork to the place of purchase for inspection.

■ Forks with serial numbers below #5100086500 need to have the leg castings replaced.

■ Forks with serial numbers above #5100086500 and below #5100149464 need to be returned for inspection.

■ Forks with serial numbers below #5100149464 which have a red paint dot on the inside of the dropout have been inspected and aren't subject to this notice.

■ Forks with serial numbers above #5100149464 are not subject to this notice.

Authorised distributors of Answer products in Australia are:

Bicycle brands: **Trek, Fisher** — Clarence Street Cyclery (02) 9299 4962; **Balance, Marin** — Hallmark Cycles (03) 9532 1777; **Parkpre** — Steve Cramer Products, (03) 9587 1466; **Diamond Back** and fork-only sales — Repco Cycle Company (03) 9568 0211

THE PRODUCT: Mitsubishi Electric has recalled **AC adaptors**, part number AZ-128 (approval no. S2N11966), supplied with cellular mobile telephone models MT-892 and MT-896. These adaptors have also been supplied as separate accessories for the above models.

The problem: There may be a defect in the plastic case, notably the seam joining the top and bottom covers, which could separate and create a safety hazard. The AC adaptors can be identified by the raised circular plastic moulding around the two power point pins.

What to do: Stop using the AC adaptor immediately and contact Mitsubishi Electric Australia's service department on 1800 636 609 for instructions.

CHOICE

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Registered office: 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville NSW 2204
Telephone: (02) 9577 3333 **Fax:** (02) 9577 3377
Subscription enquiries: (02) 9577 3355 **Consumer Information Service:** (02) 9577 3399
e-mail address: auscsumer@choice.com.au
World Wide Web address: http://www.sofcom.com.au/ACA/

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